

An Experience to Remember: Experiential Marketing's Growing Role in Cultivating Loyal Travel Customers



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INTRODUCTION

As the travel and hospitality industry navigates significant shifts in consumer behavior, the path to growth lies in adapting to new demands. Today's travelers seek more than just destinations — they crave experiences that resonate on a personal level, experiences they will cherish, remember and share.

"In 2024, the world woke up and said 'Give me experience,'" reflects Melissa Mango, president and founder of Alliance Connection, an innovative integrated marketing and communications agency helping travel brands connect with customers. "It's no longer just about the destination; it's about the journey, the story, and the lasting impact. Travelers today are seeking more than a getaway. They want meaningful, transformative and immersive experiences that resonate on a personal level and create memories worth sharing."

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the way consumers approach leisure time has fundamentally changed. The era of "revenge travel," where people seek to make up for lost time, has evolved into a deeper quest for authentic, meaningful experiences. At the forefront of such experiences lie major hospitality brands that have been paving the way for guests to fulfill their desire for connection through travel.

As Bonnie Helena, director of public relations at AIC Hotel Group, the sales and marketing arm for globally renowned resort brands such as all-inclusive Hard Rock Hotels, Nobu Hotel Los Cabos, UNICO 20°87° Hotel Riviera Maya, and AVA Cancun Resort, among others, observes, "post-pandemic traveler behavior has evolved in many ways, with the most notable being a renewed focus on meaningful and enriching experiences. We're seeing travelers place higher importance on vacations that incorporate wellness, cultural immersion and offer personal growth opportunities, whether it be via hands-on workshops, philanthropy or cultural exchanges."

This trend is reflected in growing consumer spending on travel experiences, which reached a five-year high in early 2024 and accounts for 12 percent of total global tourism sales, according to [Mastercard SpendingPulse](#). Tourists from major markets like Australia, the UK, and China are leading the way, demonstrating a strong preference for experiences over material purchases.

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Simultaneously, the rise of new technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence and machine learning, is empowering consumers to navigate the crowded marketplace with greater precision. Tools like ChatGPT enable travelers to sift through vast amounts of information and find personalized recommendations that align with their unique preferences. This technological evolution is a game-changer for marketers, offering new avenues to engage with customers at every touchpoint.

In this dynamic environment, the potential for crafting unforgettable experiences through personalization is immense. Marketers who leverage AI to personalize and enhance these experiences are well-positioned to build loyalty among today's discerning travelers. As Helena succinctly puts it, "personalization is one of the most sought-after elements of the travel experience. People are increasingly seeking those special touches that make their journeys uniquely theirs."

HOW CONSUMER HABITS HAVE CHANGED

In recent years, the travel and hospitality industry has been profoundly influenced by evolving consumer habits, which have increasingly prioritized experiences over traditional products.

This shift, while accelerated by the pandemic, reflects deeper, long-term changes in how people value and interact with their world. These evolving preferences are now at the heart of experiential marketing strategies that seek to create deeper, more meaningful connections between brands and consumers.

From Goods to Experiences

One of the most significant changes has been the growing consumer preference for experiences over material goods. This trend, driven by a desire for personal growth, social connection and memorable moments, has reshaped the landscape of consumer expectations. Travelers today aren't just looking for a place to stay or a destination to visit; they're seeking transformative experiences that enrich their lives and offer stories worth sharing. This shift has led brands to focus more on crafting unique, immersive experiences that resonate on an emotional level rather than simply selling a product or service.

In fact, according to [American Express](#), many travelers are willing to give up daily expenses such as coffee and eating out to save money for travel.

Lasting Trends According to Experts

For Melia Hotels International, the leading hotel company in Spain and one of the largest in the world, with 10 brands and more than 400 hotels across four continents, four primary trends have emerged — and remained constant — among today's travelers, according to Sara Ranghi, Melia's director of marketing and brand development, Americas. They include:



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1. **Wellness:** Travelers are vitally interested in longevity, living better, and taking care of themselves. They're seeking hotels, experiences, spas, and any other destinations that can improve their overall well-being. Wellness has evolved to more defined itineraries — think mental health, fitness, spiritual, contemporary wellness (e.g., chakra, aura, solar alignment) — and is the key to standing out in space and escaping the confines of traditional services.
2. **Luxury:** This was the only segment during the pandemic that didn't slow down; it actually increased tremendously, says Ranghi. Everything related to the luxury segment is very relevant.
3. **Sustainability:** Ranghi notes that travelers are way more educated on sustainability matters. In fact, she cautions brands in the travel and hospitality industry to avoid greenwashing.
4. **Sense of Place:** The importance of traveling and really getting to know about the destination, its food, its culture, all of it.

These trends are not only redefining the competitive landscape but also reshaping how brands engage with their customers. Brands are now required to go beyond traditional marketing tactics, focusing instead on creating immersive, personalized experiences that align with consumers' values and desires. This approach not only enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty but also drives word-of-mouth marketing, as travelers are more likely to share their positive experiences with others.

Gen Z's Influence on the Rise of Experiential Travel



UNSPLASH / POLINA KUZOVKOVA

For Gen Z, experiences are the new status symbols. The demand for in-person experiences and real-life connections has surged. This trend is particularly pronounced among this younger generation, the cohort born between the late 1990s and about 2010, who are now entering the travel market with growing spending power. A [2024 study of travel trends by Hilton Hotels](#) reveals that 43 percent of Gen Z travelers prioritize doing something new when they travel, underscoring their appetite for unique and meaningful experiences.

Gen Z is less interested in accumulating physical goods and more focused on creating memories, exploring new places, and engaging in activities that enrich their lives. This shift in priorities is driven by a desire for personal growth, social connection, and a deeper understanding of the world. Travel, therefore, is seen not just as a way to escape but as a means of self-expression and discovery.

The IRL aspect of these experiences is crucial. Gen Z, having grown up in a digital world, understands the importance of online interactions but craves the authenticity and depth that only in-person experiences can provide. Whether it's attending a music festival, exploring a new city, or participating in a cultural exchange, Gen Z travelers are looking for moments that transcend the screen and offer tangible, real-life connections.

This has led to a surge in demand for travel products that go beyond the ordinary, offering unique opportunities to engage with local cultures, participate in adventure activities, or immerse themselves in nature. To capture the attention of Gen Z travelers, brands must offer more than just a destination — they must deliver experiences that are authentic, immersive and tailored to individual interests, reflecting this generation's experiential mindset.

The Shift to Digital Engagement

The increased reliance on digital tools in recent years has fundamentally transformed the way consumers interact with travel brands. With more people turning to online platforms to discover new destinations and book accommodations and experiences, there has been a significant shift in advertising budgets toward digital channels.

Social media's enormous effect on the travel and hospitality industry cannot be understated. "Social media has become the ultimate travel guide, shaping not just where people go, but how they experience and share their journeys," says Dana Baasiri, co-founder of I'm Just A Creative, a social media agency for travel and hospitality brands. "In today's digital age, a destination's social presence is often the first impression — and it's crucial that it's as compelling as the experience itself. Travel brands that harness the power of social storytelling aren't just marketing, they're creating communities of passionate explorers eager to share their own stories."



GETTY IMAGES / ROSSHELEN

Even pre-pandemic, younger consumers showed a propensity to seek personal validation by sharing their travel experiences on social media. Those excursions included exotic destinations, gourmet restaurants, music festivals, sporting events, amusement parks, cruise ships, wellness spas, nature trips, live entertainment, among other activities. The FOMO — "fear of missing out" — mindset coincided with a shift in spending away from physical goods such as trendy designer clothes toward experiences and sharing those online.

In addition, a new-*ish* rising star is on the scene that's emerging almost as fast (if not faster) than social media did: AI. While AI has been around for years (mostly in a behind-the-scenes role) it's now increasingly being used by travelers for not only destination discovery but vacation planning. According to [SkyScanner's Travel Trends 2024 report](#), nearly half of global travelers (and more than half in the U.S.) are tapping into AI's potential for smarter and efficient trip planning. This shift towards AI-driven tools reflects a growing demand for personalized and streamlined travel experiences.

In the realm of experiential marketing, this trend offers an opportunity for travel brands to enhance their offerings. By integrating AI into their marketing strategies, brands can provide hyperpersonalized experiences that cater to the specific preferences and needs of each traveler. Furthermore, they can make sure to utilize a robust content strategy that's "GEO" friendly to appear in AI search results.

Technology has a key role in the future of travel for Gen Zers, with 83 percent saying it's important that they can book their trips entirely online, while 74 percent want to bundle reservations and services with their hotel bookings, the Hilton study found. In another sign of technology's growing importance in the travel and hospitality sector, 84 percent of Gen Zers said it's important that they're able to use their personal devices seamlessly while traveling.

RESILIENT SPENDING AND THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY IN TRAVEL

Despite economic headwinds, the travel industry continues to see robust consumer spending, particularly among Gen Z and millennials, who prioritize experiences even in the face of financial challenges. These generations, known for valuing meaningful, authentic experiences over material goods, are driving a significant portion of the \$8.6 trillion in traveler outlays expected in 2024, which will account for roughly 9 percent of global GDP, according to McKinsey & Company.

In an era marked by rising living costs and economic uncertainty, travelers are becoming more discerning in their choices. They're not just cutting back — they're making every trip count. Younger travelers, in particular, are being selective about destinations, prioritizing immersive experiences that offer unique value over mere frequency of travel. This shift underscores a broader trend: even in tough times, the desire for memorable, enriching experiences remains strong.

“Overall, the travel and hospitality industries are navigating a complex landscape shaped by current economic uncertainties,” Helena says. “Consumers are increasingly seeking value for their money and flexible booking options to adapt to changing circumstances. We’re seeing a noticeable shift towards value-driven spending. While these challenges exist, they also drive innovation and adaptation, influencing how businesses operate to cater to new traveler demands.”

The travel industry can continue to thrive, even in the face of economic uncertainty, by delivering memorable, value-driven experiences that consumers are willing to invest in.

“Consumers are increasingly seeking value for their money and flexible booking options to adapt to changing circumstances.”

- BONNIE HELENA, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, AIC HOTEL GROUP

In response to these evolving demands, travel and hospitality brands are turning to technology to enhance the customer experience, drive loyalty, and increase customer lifetime value. The integration of advanced technologies isn't just a trend; it's a strategic necessity.

AI is at the forefront of this transformation, enabling brands to deliver highly personalized experiences throughout the customer journey. By leveraging extensive demographic, behavioral and psychographic data, AI empowers marketers to craft tailored interactions that resonate deeply with travelers. This level of personalization is proving to be a key driver of both revenue and guest satisfaction.

Moreover, innovations such as contactless check-in and checkout, mobile messaging, and voice-activated services are rapidly becoming the standard. These technologies, once considered optional perks, are now expected by travelers who seek greater convenience and control over their experiences.

The common thread is clear: technology is not just enhancing travel experiences, it's reshaping them. To stay competitive, brands must invest in solutions that align with the evolving expectations of today's travelers, and marketers must focus on promoting the enriched experiences that these technologies help to create.

ADAPTABILITY IS KEY TO FUTURE SUCCESS



UNSPLASH / AHMET KURT

Given how rapidly consumer behavior evolves, brands in the travel and hospitality industries must be able to pivot quickly based on market conditions. This includes adjusting marketing strategies based on seasonal factors, including fluctuating tourist levels during peak seasons, off-seasons, shoulder seasons, and holidays.

There are steps travel and hospitality brands can take to ensure future success:

→ **Enhance Flexibility and Responsiveness:** Flexibility is crucial in today's fast-paced market. Brands that can quickly adapt their offerings to meet changing consumer demands will thrive. This might involve rolling out seasonal packages, offering flexible booking policies, or rapidly introducing new amenities that cater to emerging trends, such as wellness or sustainability. By being responsive to consumer needs, brands can maintain a competitive edge and ensure that they remain top-of-mind for travelers.

"We're all trying to rapidly adapt: more wellness experiences, more luxury experiences, new properties, and being sustainable in everything we do," Ranghi says. "It's important to stay relevant. Our brands have to be flexible to make sure time-to-market is as quick as possible."

Helena from AIC Hotel Group echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the critical role of adaptability in the travel industry.

"Having the ability to pivot and adapt to changing landscapes is crucial," advises Helena. "Hoteliers and travel brands should be using data to stay ahead of the curve, including understanding client preferences and industry trends. Analyzing booking patterns, feedback, and market trends can help make informed decisions and tailor offerings to meet evolving needs and improve the overall client experience."

→ **Prioritize Experiential Marketing:** In times of economic uncertainty, experiential marketing becomes an even more critical tool for differentiation. By creating memorable, emotionally resonant experiences, brands can build deeper connections with their customers. This might include hosting exclusive events, offering personalized services, or designing unique activities that align with the desires of today's travelers. These experiences can:

- foster brand loyalty and advocacy;
- set your brand apart in an increasingly crowded marketplace;
- create memorable moments that go beyond the guest room; and
- drive more revenue and profits through direct bookings, reducing dependency on online travel agencies (OTAs) by building direct relationships with guests.

→ **Create and Promote Shareable Moments Through Experiences:** In the age of social media, creating experiences that travelers want to share is vital. By designing “Instagrammable” or TikTok-worthy moments and unique experiences that resonate with your audience, you not only enhance the guest experience but also generate organic marketing that can reach a broader audience. This type of user-generated content can be a powerful tool for attracting new customers and building your brand’s online presence.

Experiential marketing is a strategic investment for travel and hospitality brands. As travelers increasingly seek unique and immersive experiences, formulating a marketing strategy to highlight such offerings is proven to drive significant ROI.

SHOWCASING SUCCESS: INNOVATIVE EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING IN ACTION

In the ever-evolving travel and hospitality industry, the ability to create memorable and engaging experiences is a powerful tool for brand differentiation and customer loyalty. The following case studies highlight how Alliance Connection worked with two renowned hotel clients to successfully leverage experiential marketing to not only meet but exceed their business goals.



“Through strategic partnerships and innovative marketing campaigns, we’ve worked with these brands to craft unique experiences that resonated deeply with their target audiences, driving significant engagement, revenue and brand loyalty,” says Melissa Mango, president and founder of Alliance Connection. “Our goal has always been to help travel brands connect with their customers through meaningful interactions to meet the needs of today’s traveler.”

Case Study: Gaming Lounge Wins Families’ Loyalty for Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya

Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya was looking to attract more families and offer dynamic experiences to various age groups. In an effort to set itself apart from the competition in the popular tourist destination, the resort was keen on integrating a brand experience that resonated with guests of all ages while tapping into the synergies of music and gaming.

Alliance Connection secured a gaming partnership with HyperX, the choice gaming equipment provider of pro gamers, to launch a first-of-its-kind gaming lounge at Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya.

The marketing partnership launched in December 2021. Targeting gamers of all ages, gaming was brought to life at the resort through events, tournaments, and a dedicated space to host special appearances and extend travel invitations to the gaming industry’s best of the best, including HyperX personalities and influencers from around the globe.

The introduction of a dedicated gaming lounge has been a clear win for Hard Rock Hotel Riviera Maya.

Since its opening, the gaming lounge has generated more than 10,500 bookings and nearly \$187,000 in ancillary revenue, with the average user spending two hours per session gaming.

Case Study: Getting Well Through Wellness Retreats: Inside Zoëtry Wellness & Spa Resorts' Revamped Marketing Strategy

Over the past decade, the global wellness tourism sector has continued to grow its market share within the travel industry. Its size was valued at \$814.6 billion in 2022 and is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 12.42 percent from 2023 to 2030, according to [Grand View Research](#).

Zoëtry Wellness & Spa Resorts, an all-inclusive boutique luxury resort chain, sought to tap into the growing trend of wellness travel. Given the market opportunity that wellness tourism presented, Zoëtry leaned in. In partnership with Alliance Connection, Zoëtry sought to establish itself as the leading well-being destination through intimate and elevated retreats featuring expert speakers, influencers and brand partners, ultimately garnering media coverage, marketing exposure and sales.

In addition to designing, producing and executing the retreats, Alliance Connection secured brand partnerships that heightened awareness and generated bookings, including an author-come-along sweepstakes. For example, ADORAThery hosted an aura reading and provided fragrance in tune with guests' chakras. Art of Tea hosted a wellness tea blending bar activation that taught guests how to mindfully prepare and sample tea. Zoëtry Wellness & Spa Resorts' retreat-focused brand integrations were strategic alliances that enhanced its guests' experiences.

Additionally, best-selling author Margaret Townsend enriched the retreat experience by providing each attendee with a copy of her book, "The Breathwork Companion," as well as leading an immersive breathwork workshop. To generate buzz and expand awareness of the retreat, Workman Publishing and Townsend collaborated on a "Come-Along" sweepstakes, offering readers a chance to win a spot at the March retreat, where they could meet Townsend and participate in her transformative breathwork session.

The results of those efforts affirm that Zoëtry Wellness & Spa Resorts is headed in the right direction. This two-part event, encompassing a sneak-peek media preview in September 2023 and the consumer-facing retreat in March 2024, reached 4.2 million unique consumers and delivered \$1.3 million in media value.



WHAT TO DO NEXT: FORMULATING AN EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING PLAN

In today's travel landscape, where experiences reign supreme, capturing the attention and loyalty of leisure travelers requires more than just traditional offerings. To thrive in a competitive marketplace, especially during economic uncertainty, travel and hospitality brands must strategically align themselves with the experiential desires of modern consumers. Here's how to do it:

1. Identify and address key challenges.

Begin by pinpointing the specific challenges that your brand faces in the current market. Understanding these pain points will allow you to tailor your approach effectively. Key issues might include:

- **Rising Competition:** New entrants are flooding the market, making it harder to stand out.
- **Attention Scarcity:** Cutting through the noise online and capturing consumer attention is increasingly difficult.
- **Demand for Meaningful Experiences:** There's growing pressure to offer culturally relevant and impactful experiences that resonate with today's travelers.

2. Lean into storytelling to amplify your brand.

Storytelling is a powerful tool in experiential marketing. Showcase the unique experiences your properties offer by crafting compelling narratives that engage your audience and foster loyalty. Consider the following strategies:

- **User-Generated Content:** Leverage authentic content created by your guests, such as social media posts or reviews, in your marketing campaigns.
- **Repurpose Existing Programming:** Highlight existing resort programs or events in fresh, engaging ways that resonate with potential visitors.
- **Virtual and Augmented Reality:** Invest in VR/AR technology to offer virtual tours, allowing potential guests to "experience" your destinations before they book, enhancing their connection to your brand.

“Live events, pop-up stores, concerts, activations with influencers ... all of these are already part of our marketing mix and for sure are here to stay.”

- SARA RANGHI, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING AND BRAND DEVELOPMENT, AMERICAS, MELIA HOTELS INTERNATIONAL

3. Forge strategic partnerships to enhance experiences.

Collaborate with like-minded brands to create mutually beneficial partnerships that elevate the customer experience and expand your reach. Consider alliances with:

- **Culinary Experiences:** Partner with renowned restaurants or chefs to offer exclusive dining experiences.
- **Local Culture and Arts:** Work with museums, artisans and local cultural institutions to provide guests with immersive, authentic experiences.
- **Entertainment Venues:** Team up with music venues, sports events, festivals, etc., to offer unique, unforgettable moments that draw travelers to your property.

Experiential marketing has been and will continue to be an important part of Melia Hotels' efforts to engage current and prospective guests, Ranghi notes. "Live events, pop-up stores, concerts, activations with influencers ... all of these are already part of our marketing mix and for sure are here to stay," she says.

4. Personalize and enhance customer interactions with technology.

Harness the power of AI and technology to tailor your marketing efforts to individual preferences and behaviors. Use data-driven insights to:

- **Target Demographics and Behaviors:** Analyze data such as age, income, browsing history and past bookings to deliver personalized offers and experiences.
- **Enhance Customer Touchpoints:** Improve interactions at every stage of the customer journey, ensuring that each touchpoint feels relevant and personalized.
- **Collect Post-Stay Feedback:** Gather detailed feedback from guests after their stay to identify what worked and what didn't.
- **Refine Future Campaigns:** Use these insights to refine your marketing efforts, ensuring that each campaign is more effective than the last.

By focusing on these actionable strategies, travel and hospitality brands can not only navigate the complexities of the current market but also build lasting connections with travelers through unforgettable experiences. In doing so, your brand can stand out, thrive and continue to grow even in challenging economic times.

CONCLUSION

The travel and hospitality industry stands at the cusp of significant growth, even as consumer behaviors and attitudes toward leisure continue to evolve. In this dynamic environment, the key to capturing the attention of today's discerning travelers and building enduring relationships lies in a multifaceted marketing approach — one that prioritizes the creation of unforgettable, shareable experiences.

“Experiential marketing is poised to play a crucial role in brands' efforts to acquire and retain travelers in the future,” Helena forecasts. “More than a trend, experiential marketing is a strategic approach that enables travel brands to connect deeply with travelers, differentiate themselves in a competitive landscape, and foster long-term loyalty through memorable and impactful experiences.”

This renewed appreciation for real-world experiences isn't just a passing phase; it's a powerful, enduring shift that transcends age groups and demographics.

The demand for unique and personalized travel experiences remains robust. Consumers are increasingly utilizing advanced technologies like generative AI and machine learning to discover tailor-made recommendations, turning casual browsers into committed buyers. These tools aren't just enhancing the travel planning process, they're revolutionizing it.

In this rapidly changing landscape, travel and hospitality marketers must rise to the challenge by differentiating their brands and creating meaningful touchpoints with consumers.

“By leveraging the latest technologies to personalize every interaction throughout the customer journey, brands can not only meet the evolving expectations of today's travelers but also cultivate deep, lasting loyalty,” remarks Alliance Connection's Mango. “The future of travel belongs to those who can blend the power of technology with the art of experience, crafting journeys that resonate long after the trip is over.”

WHO WE ARE



Alliance Connection is more than just a marketing agency — it is a catalyst for transformation in the travel industry. Rooted in the need for innovative solutions that tackle today's marketing challenges, the agency is driven by its relentless pursuit of storytelling, unique experiences, and marketing collaborations that resonate with travelers and inspire meaningful action through owned, earned and shared media. Through reimagined, experiential events and integrated marketing and communications, Alliance Connection revolutionizes the way travel brands connect with audiences and influence buying decisions. For more information, visit www.allianceconnection.com or follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#).



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