

SXSW

THE INSIDER REPORT

EMERGING **TRENDS**

STRATEGIC **INSIGHTS**

KEY **TAKEAWAYS**



Cont

tents



01 THE BEAT

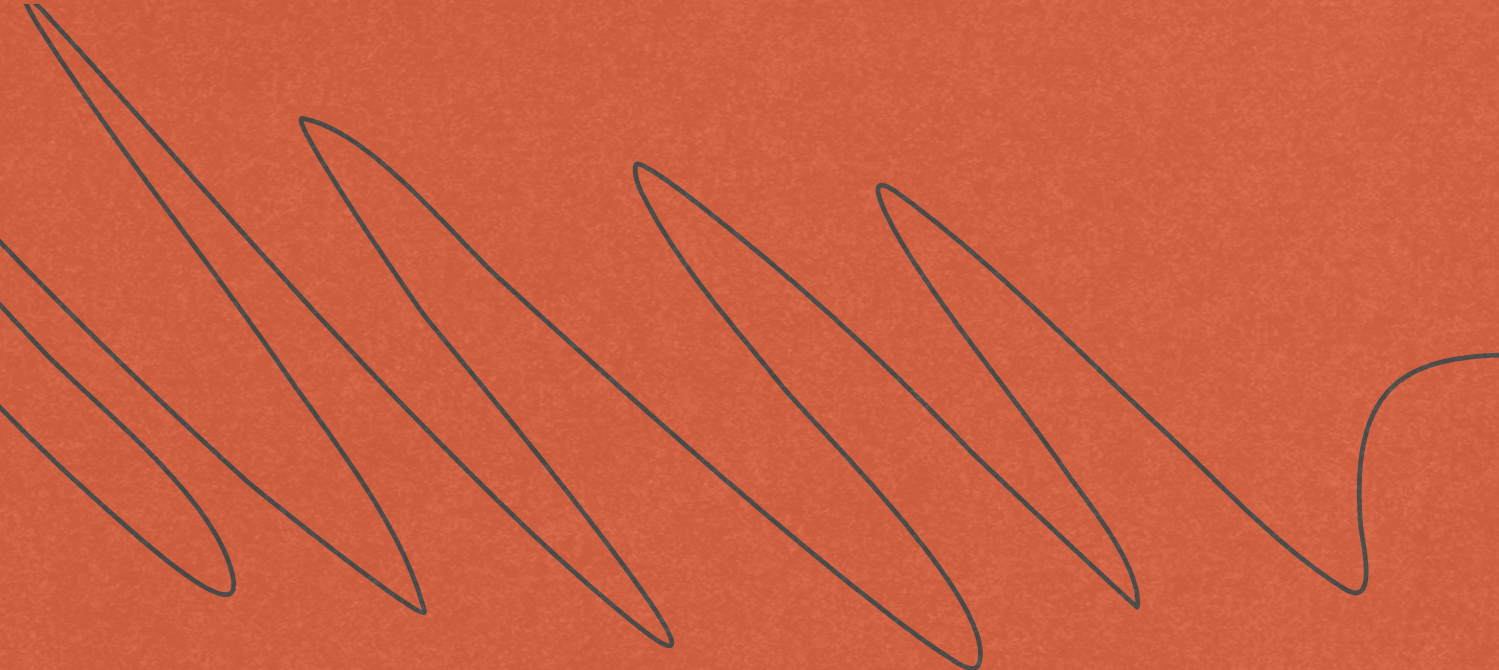
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The Beat



Welcome back, y'all.

SXSW celebrated its 40th anniversary this year, and the festival's evolution felt less like a pivot and more like a reckoning with what it means to be creative, connected, and human in an AI-saturated world. From Timnit Gebru's standing-room-only "Reclaiming Our Humanity in the Age of AI" session to Chef José Andrés' emotional induction into the SXSW Hall of Fame and Russ's Music Keynote on artist pathways and ownership, the week's most talked-about moments centered on care, community, and responsibility as much as innovation.

Across downtown, AI-focused programming and experiential story beats underscored how deeply technology is woven into every corner of the conference. Yet the experiences that resonated most were the ones that invited attendees to slow down, tell stories, and see themselves in the work, leaving SXSW 2026 less like a static showcase of creativity, and more like a live rehearsal for the future we want to inhabit.



By the numbers

SXSW 2026

On the ground, we encountered a handful of significant departures from SXSW's established structural norm. Spanning a breezy seven days instead of the traditional nine, the festival featured a newly distributed footprint with the absence of the Austin Convention Center, SXSW's home base for more than thirty years.

That shift pushed the festival's pool of badge holders into hotel ballrooms, track-specific "clubhouse" zones, and a reduced slate of music venues, producing rooms that felt fuller than in recent post-pandemic years and delivering legitimate tradeoffs- most in the form of competing marquee shows billed on the same night.

600+

MENTOR AND
NETWORKING
SESSIONS

130+

VENUES

179

EXHIBITORS

300K

EST. TOTAL
ATTENDEES

4.3K

EVENTS

33

TRACKS

450

ACTIVATING
BRANDS

1.4K+

PANEL
SESSIONS

1.7K

SHOWCASES

Innovation-track sessions frequently hit near-capacity, film screenings packed theaters deep into the week, but interestingly, airport data hinted at a lopsided curve, showing a record volume of departures on Sunday and pointing toward how front-loaded attendance felt this year. For decades, SXSW has cemented its status as a brand experience playground, earning a unique slot in the marketing calendar for brands across every category to get wild and weird, venture in up-close and personal with real audience members (or brand skeptics!), and of course, create cultural momentum by showing up where creative people get inspired. After all, where else can attendees have a burger at Brisk x Prime Video's Invincible Burger Mart and co-work at Logitech's mobile office just next door?



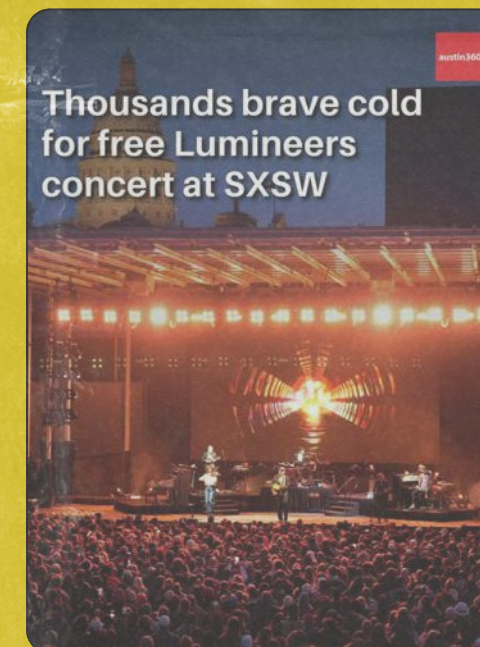
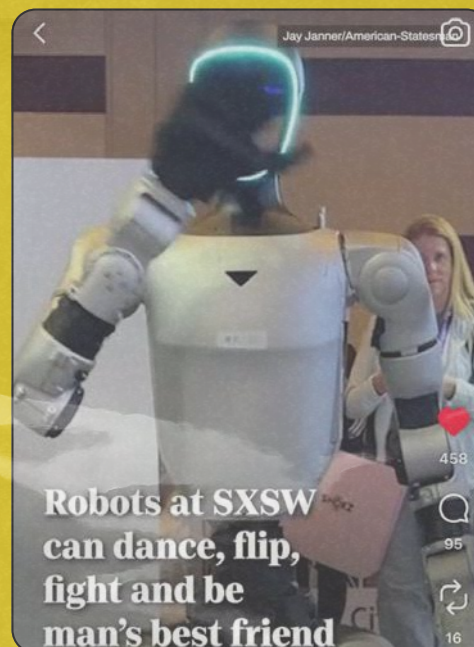
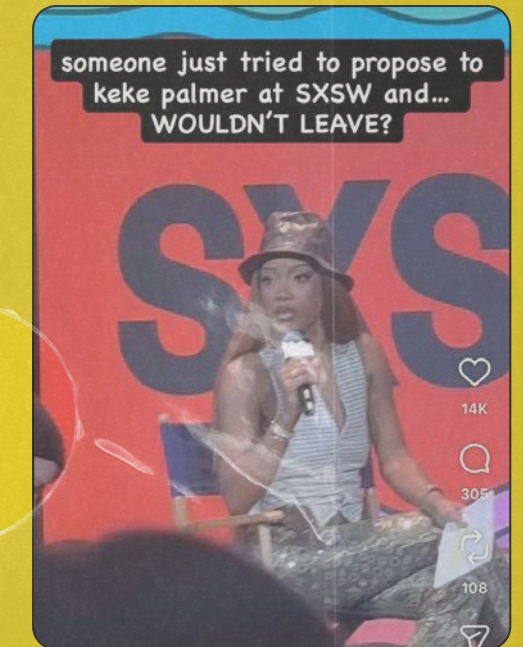
Lay of the land

This year, SXSW felt less like a pop-up pavilion orbiting the Austin Convention Center (like the Alamo, may we never forget), and more like a citywide patchwork of planets, each with its own gravity, culture, and overall feeling. With the festival's longtime hub under construction, attendee discovery shifted to the streets: nearby hotel ballrooms doubled as innovation salons, "clubhouse" zones became landing pads, and brand experiences stepped in to literally reshape the map.

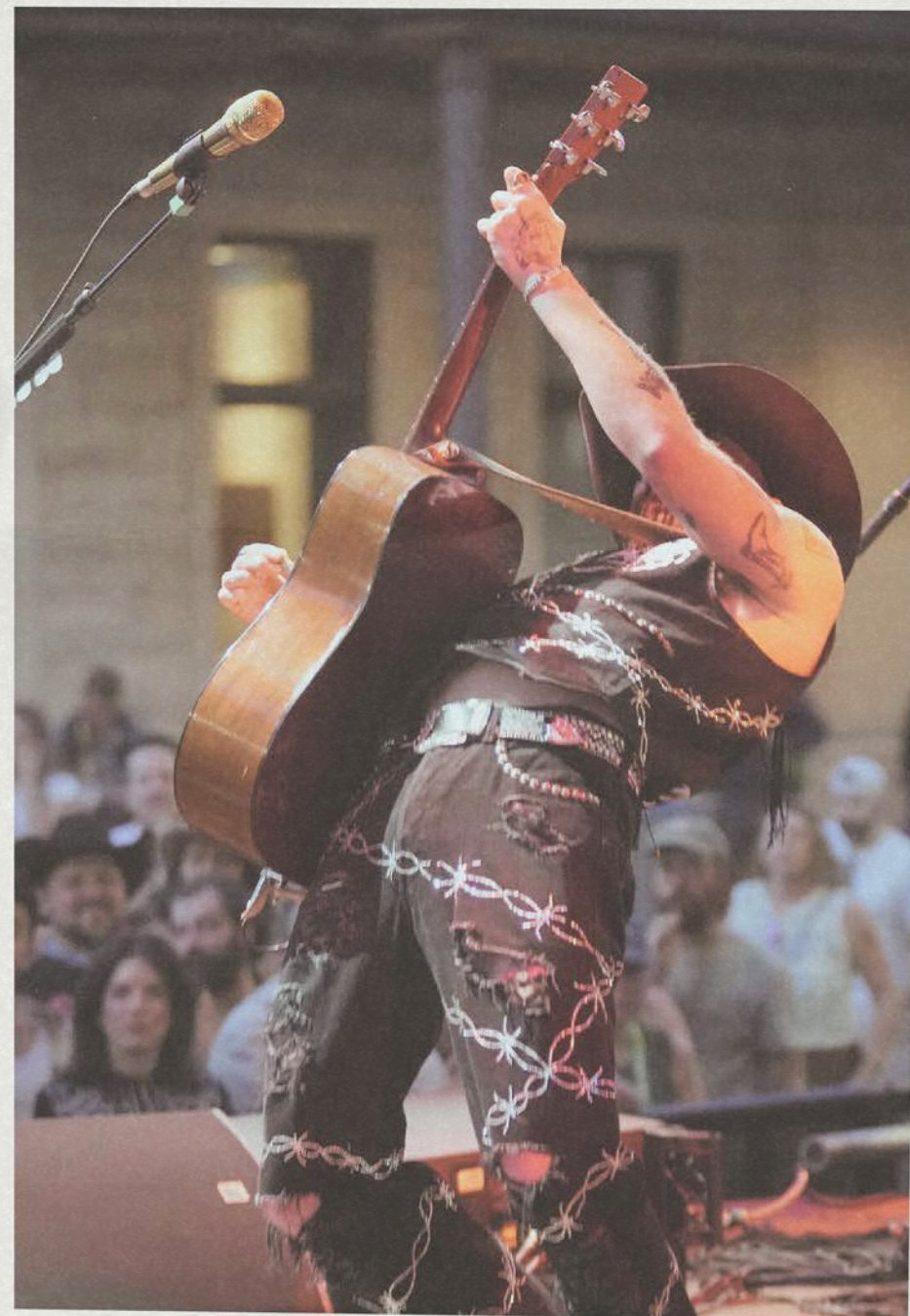
Rivian's Electric Joyride shut down a block of Congress Avenue, for instance, dropping rugged dirt piles into Austin's urban core, turning test drives into a cinematic moment with the Capitol as an impossible backdrop beyond the R2's skyward-pointing windshield.



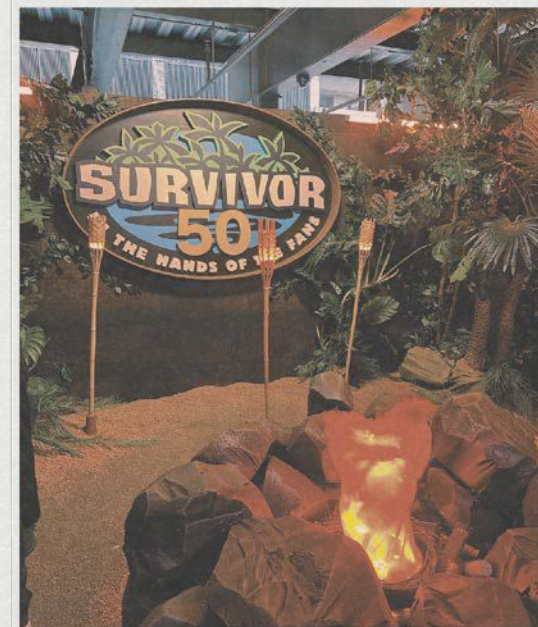
With unpredictable Austin weather, robots roaming the streets, and a multitude of music and film showcases, the festival delivered a series of unforgettable—and occasionally weird—moments, including an impromptu proposal and a robotic eye rolling its way down the red carpet. As the nexus of culture and delightful chaos, SXSW draws major publications, media outlets, and influencers on the ground to capture the latest happenings and amplify all the noteworthy news (and then some) to the masses.



The constellation effect



For attendees, this geographical decentralization came with tradeoffs: instead of the old SXSW's serendipity found in stumbling upon a new find just a block over, festival-goers had to account for a wider spread of interest areas, leading to more intentional cross-town trekking (made possible by autonomous taxis, like Zoox and Waymo) and, at times, more friction while wayfinding. Despite this, this patchwork effect also lent attendees a stronger sense that the festival was entwined with the fabric of the city itself, rather than tethered to one single point. Badge pick-up this year, for instance, implemented a distributed approach in hopes of chasing off the long lines often remembered as a hallmark of festival kick-off. Seemingly taking a note from the book of peer conferences that implement a similar, distributed approach, lines this year— inclusive of badge-specific lanes to help break up the wait further— felt far breezier than they'd been in years past.





In with the new

New this year, SXSW's track-aligned clubhouse model created badge-specific oases designed to offer attendees respite from a busy day, and partners a chance to show up differently.

Inside, big brands and smaller players coexisted without the footprint (or price tag) of a standalone brand house. Amidst Austin coffee outposts and vending machines with lunch-on-the-go, partners slotted into visually distinctive sections of the clubhouse ecosystem, all layered into the Innovation, Film & TV, and Music Clubhouses. These track-specific landing pads and living rooms created a space for attendees to find respite, while lowering the barrier to entry for brands to be "in the room" with core audiences.



Inside Scoop



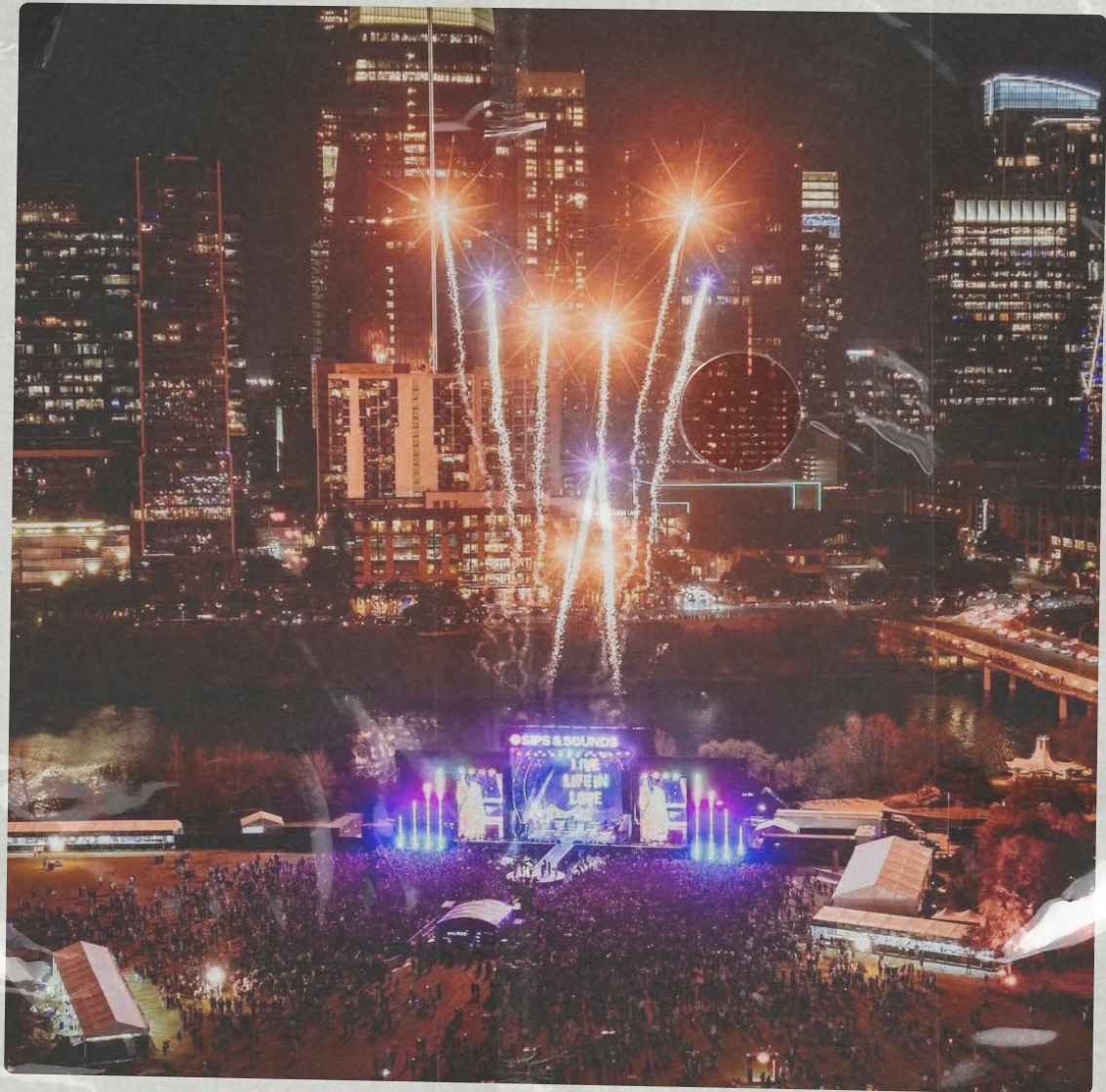
Every year, Austin becomes a temporary headquarters for people who genuinely believe they can change the world through a song, a screenplay, or a robot. Spoiler: some of them are right. Here's what actually cut through the noise across music, film, and innovation this year.



Hitting all the right notes

SXSW's **Music Track** brought together thousands of artists and industry professionals for daytime conference programming and nighttime showcases across 50+ stages, from big names to emerging acts and international delegations.

Music attendance saw a 20% bump this year, with big moments spanning marquee sets from Lola Young, Don Toliver, Alanis Morissette, and Charley Crockett, alongside the festival's signature deep-cut discoveries across club shows and day parties.



"SXSW is a space for music people to connect with artists, mentors, and label execs, or open industry doors that would typically be closed."

The music category was noticeably more integrated into the broader festival this year, with large-scale brand stages and houses – like Coca-Cola's skyline-backed Sips & Sounds at Auditorium Shores, JBL feature shows at their orange-swathed Livebrary, and Billboard's sold-out three-night series— turning headline performances and artist conversations into the connective tissue between conference days and late-night showcases.

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From set to screen

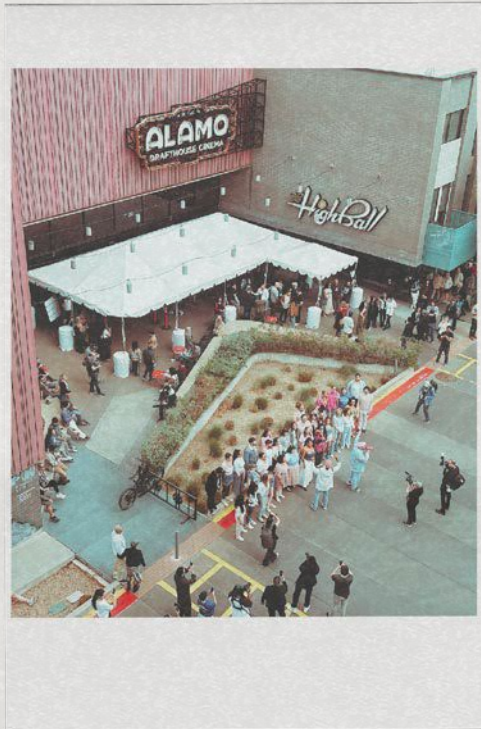


Marking the 33rd edition of SXSW's screen program, this year's Film and TV Track showcased hundreds of screenings throughout the week across eight theaters. Highlighted features spanned narrative and documentary competitions, spotlights, TV premieres, shorts blocks, experiential activations, and more, alongside a conference layer of sessions, Q&As, and meetups with filmmakers, executives, and other industry players.

Badgeholders eagerly packed premieres, red-carpet galas, and Q&As downtown, with some making a quick appearance before turning around to LA for the Oscars Ceremony, happening concurrently that weekend.

"A career-forward key to cinema, where you can see breakout stories first and work the room with the film/TV power grid."

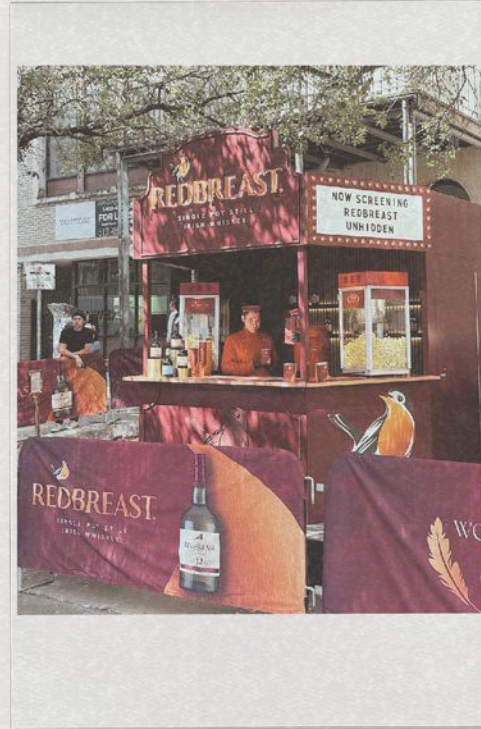
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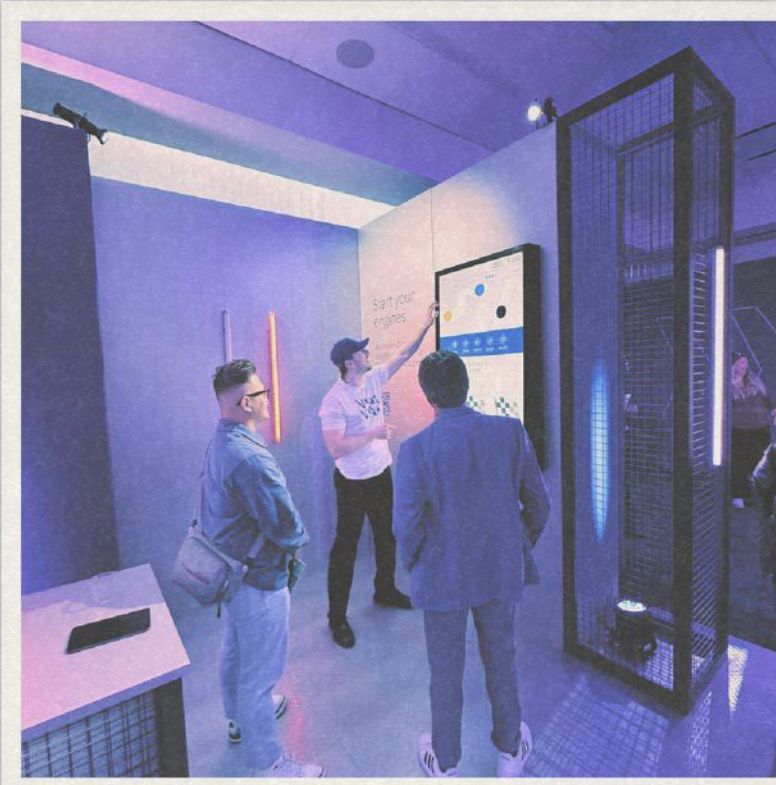
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Much of what people love about this track is the festival feeling: multi-block street closures for red carpets, experiencing talent and visionaries like Steven Spielberg up close, slipping into under-the-radar indie screenings, and drifting between flicks and brand-backed experiences. The features this year spanned buzzy openings like *Pretty Lethal* and genre midnighters, including the comedy-thriller *Drag* at the iconic Paramount Theatre, which will likely be closed for SXSW 2027 due to a 10-month renovation project starting in June.

A Texas-sized think tank

The **Innovation Track** serves as an annual ideas-and-industry summit spanning Brand & Marketing, Creator Economy, Culture, Startups, Tech & AI, Health, and more. Blending keynotes and featured sessions with panels, hands-on workshops, core conversations, and clubhouses, this area of SXSW engaged “forward-focused” creatives, agencies, founders, corporates, and futurists.



"Where founders, investors, and operators talk AI, capital, and 'what's next,' for better or worse."

Despite major changes to the Innovation layout, including a pause in the long-running Innovation Awards and a dispersed approach with programs taking place across various offsite hubs, the appetite for discovery remained strong. Festival-goers tuned into sessions spanning AI and humanism, startup building, cities and climate, health, and media. Much of the value people reported finding, however, came from hallway networking and exploring brand activations rather than uniformly breakthrough content.





Field Notes



SXSW attracts a specific kind of person: curious, opinionated, chronically early to everything. And the brands that showed up right this year knew exactly who they were talking to. The best exhibits functioned less like activations and more like invitations — into new ideas, unfamiliar perspectives, and experiences that felt less like marketing and more like, genuinely, a lot.

While attending this most recent edition of a festival we know and love, we found ourselves asking some meta-questions in this era of change and upheaval that seems to exist everywhere we look:
At the core of it all, why do people come to SXSW?
What are people looking for from their experience?
And what constitutes whether SXSW this year or any year, for them or for us all, was 'good' or 'bad'?



Reasons to believe





The answer shouldn't surprise you.

There is never one singular reason that an experience inspires people – especially at a festival designed to move people in wildly unique and personal ways. Historically, the tracks have been enough of a data point to prove that people come with an array of ambitions for their festival experience, and different diagnostics for whether or not they made the most of it.

Now that the festival has entered its fourth decade, we're seeing that not only do track-led interests dictate someone's experience on the ground in Austin, but their individual hopes and desires as a human, professional, and enjoyer of art do, too. Thus, we've documented SXSW as the kaleidoscope it is, represented in full color through four of the most common, compelling, and modern reasons to attend.

(By the way: if you're a brand marketer or someone reimagining how your experiences can reach your audience, the following pages should inspire you to design from a human-first lens, too.)



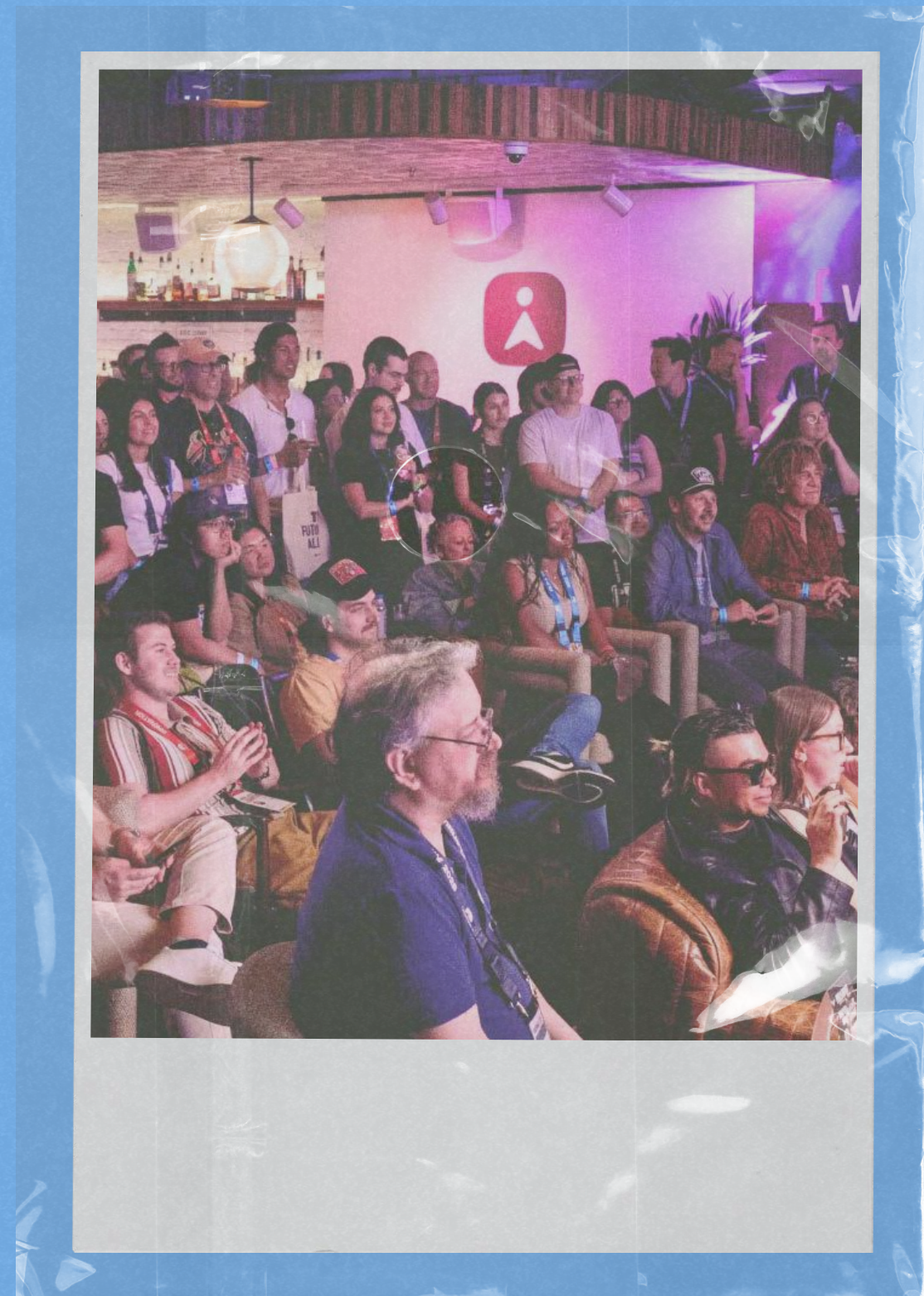
"I go to SXSW to be creatively moved by shows, stories, or spaces I've never seen before."

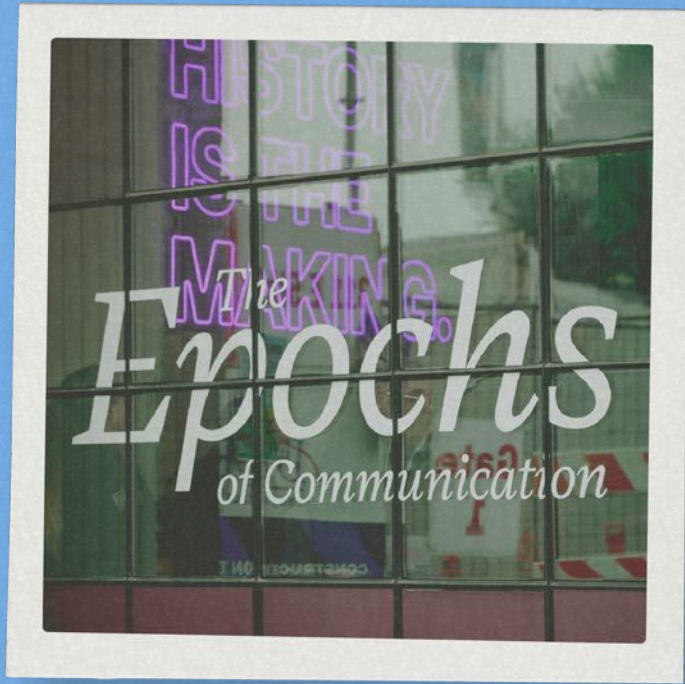
The Creative Explorer comes to SXSW to recharge their creative reserves. They're drawn to deeply immersive activations regardless of their familiarity level because they revel in being transported, whether by a cinematic brand build, a late-night showcase, or a surprise screening. They'll happily cross town for a set, a film premiere, or a talk if it promises goosebumps: a moving story, a provocative idea mashup, or a speaker who can connect unexpected dots.

For this person, a successful SXSW experience is felt when walking away with a few moments that reframe how their world looks and feels, long after the badge comes off.

This year, Creative Explorers were delighted by moments of immersive storytelling that offered a fresh perspective on the routines, worries, and even pipe dreams that inhabit everyday life.

Creative exploration





Brands who showed up to SXSW with a thoughtfully-designed alternate reality to step into, or an unexpected twist on a typical refrain, tended to be the most well-attended and well-discussed activations we encountered on the ground. And regardless of a brand's official festival affiliation, SXSW attendees (and the authors of this report) were keen on reorganizing their Tetris board schedule to accommodate inspiring experiential stumble-upons - especially those that came highly recommended by enthusiastic passers-by.



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THE FUTURE IS ALL YOU

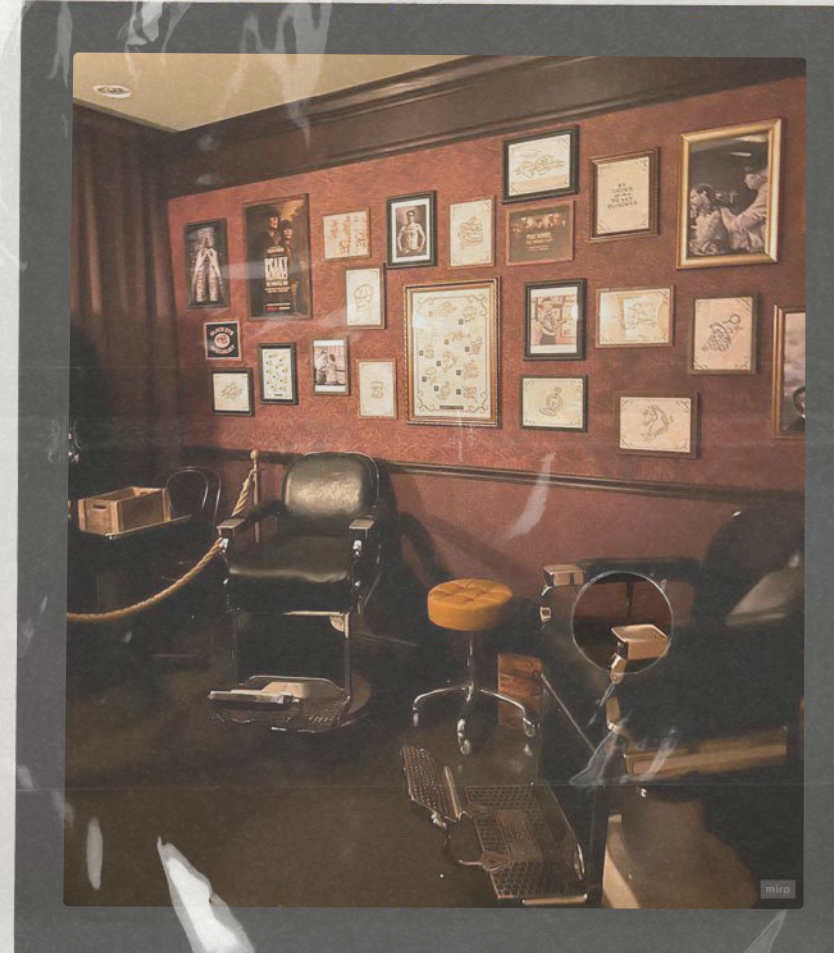
The Epochs of Communication exhibit in the **Superhuman Suite** became one of the festival's word-of-mouth darlings, called out in Forbes and LinkedIn posts as a "must-see" for anyone curious about where human expression goes next. Moving from cave paintings to printing presses, guests were able to touch, read, and paint their way through a tactile immersive history of our relationship with technology, offering an unexpectedly humanist take on the present and future of AI.

A rare installation that felt both visually transportive and intellectually grounding, the cohesion in the Suite enabled downstairs programming and the playable museum upstairs to tell the same story: AI amplifies the human voice, but is not a replacement for it.

02

GOOD PROOFING WATER

Netflix's *Peaky Blinders: The Immortal Man* pub offered Peaky Blinders fans and newcomers alike a taste of 1920s Birmingham. Netflix transformed The Fox Den into a portal directly into The Garrison. Inside, guests were surrounded by period-accurate woodwork, vintage seating, low warm lighting, and a custom bar with beer taps and whiskey-forward cocktails that immersed the senses. Easter eggs and props along the walls and tucked into back rooms tipped their hats to the Shelby legacy, giving fans a bar's worth of in-universe ephemera to explore. Rather than being told the story from a screen, people experienced the feeling of stepping inside the Peaky Blinders universe the moment they crossed the threshold.



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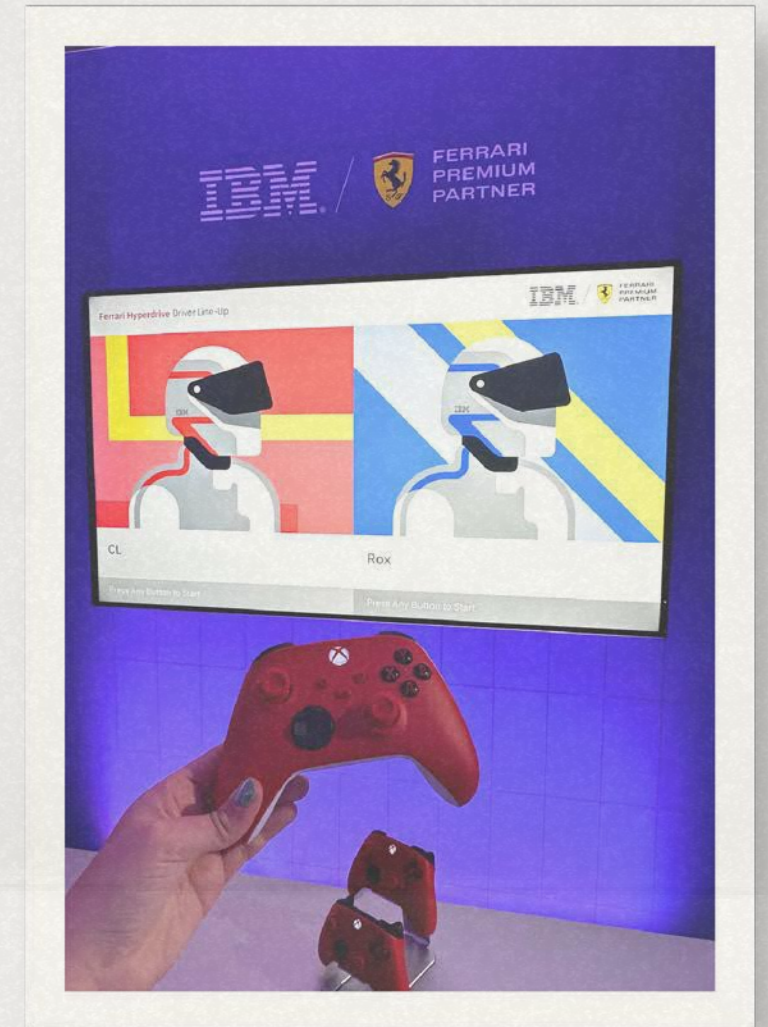
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IN POLE POSITION

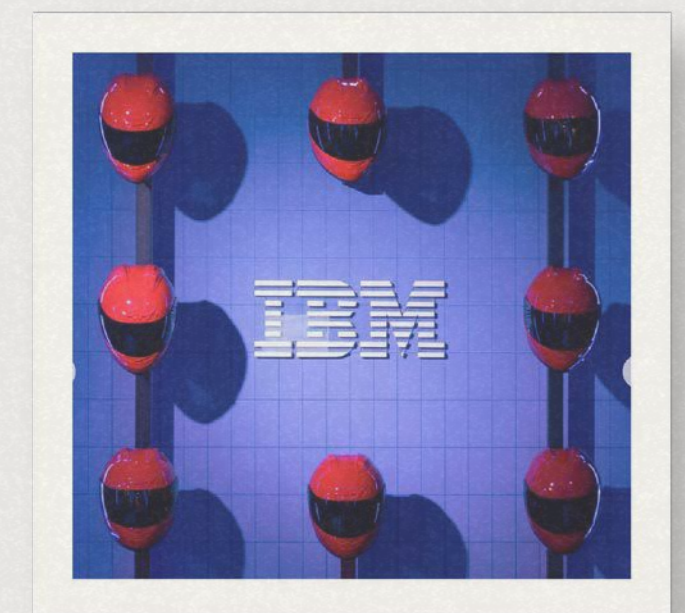
IBM's *AI Sports Club with Ferrari* was the interactive "enterprise tech" play that actually seemed to understand its own abstraction problem. Instead of bogging the experience down with lengthy explanations of Watson's capabilities, the Sports Club routed all of that through a single, legible emotion: competitive adrenaline. Guests felt the stakes found in racing simulators and competitive speed-runs, but the takeaway was what was underneath the hood: IBM is the quiet intelligence that supercharges elite performance. It's an elegant reframing: IBM is no longer limited optically to enterprise, instead occupying high-stakes, luxury consumer arenas that signal the pinnacle of speed, power, and technical performance.



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JUST A LITTLE UNWELL

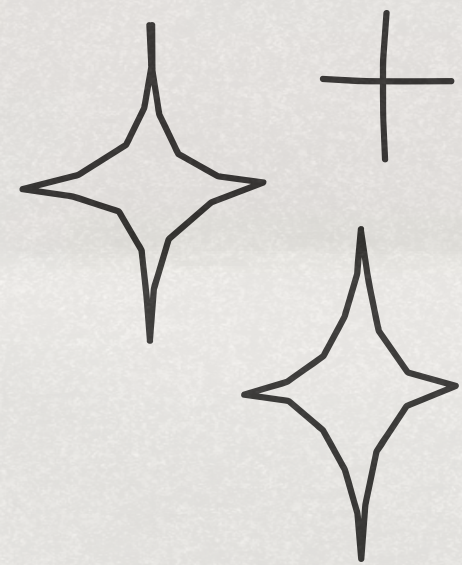
The **Unwell County Fair** is podcaster Alex Cooper's brand network and wellness universe, self-billed as "experiences all centered around our true lives and real conversations." Unwell tapped Hulu, Deep Eddy, and Polymarket to join in the Unwell festivities via a midway of food, carnival games, and crafts. The result was a micro-world fueled by fandom, humming with the promise of newfound friendship you'd find while waiting in line at a show. When Alex Cooper herself was present, she converted that fan energy into a room-wide high— a stand-out example of a creator-owned brand using place to prove that the real asset isn't just product, but rather, proximity to the person and the like-minded community she convenes.

05

RYZE AND SHINE

RYZE didn't try to out-party SXSW, but rather, it positioned itself as the antidote. **RYZE's coffee pop-up** offered free mushroom coffee and matcha, yoga, live music, and customizable tumblers within a day market setting. It functioned as a daytime oasis for the burned-out and weary, embodying the idea that Ryze is your functional, feel-good cuppa when you're running on fumes.

Before RYZE ever poured a cup in Austin, they'd turned Instagram into their real flagship store; an always-on loop of UGC, performance ads, and viral reels that growth marketers now openly cite as a \$100M playbook in its own right. The brand's SXSW pop-up wasn't an introduction so much as a payoff: a real-world sequel where you finally get to experience the product you've heard so much about.





Platform for forum

"I participate in SXSW to engage in topics meaningful to me, and immerse myself in new ones."

Underneath all the note-taking and panel-hopping, some attend SXSW to re-architect their worldview with brilliant strangers as their co-authors. They see the festival as a rare forum where diverse perspectives across industries, geographies, and identities can chip away old mental models in favor of newly upgraded ones.

Their core modus operandi at SXSW isn't "do the most," it's "be less narrow", using structured conversations, live debate, and off-the-record chats to port those upgrades back into their professional and personal life.



In a world that mostly rewards polished certainty, SXSW is one of the few places where it's socially acceptable (and professionally advantageous) to show up curious, provisional, and ready to contribute to the dialogue, because the forum itself is the product these attendees are buying. Personally, this attendee is present to widen their aperture: swapping stories in queues, comparing notes over coffee, and walking away with a handful of new peers— which is why for them, SXSW's hundreds of panels and dense session catalog are a feature, not a bug.





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CELEBRATION OF HERSTORY

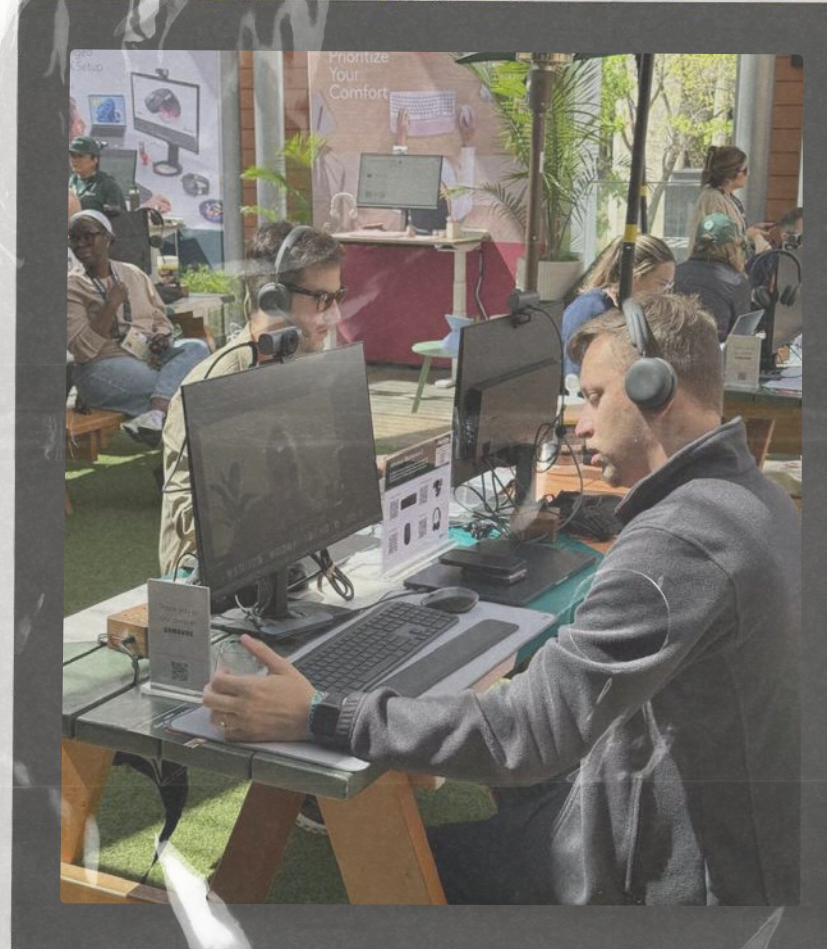
A recurring fixture of SXSW, the **The Female Quotient Lounge** returned in full swing, this time with a western flair. From Olympians to CEOs, high-caliber speakers across industries graced the stage as programming cycled every half hour, making for a steady stream of discussions throughout the day. Guests moved in and out of conversations spanning a variety of topics, from fem-tech and founders reflecting on their journeys to brand building and candid interviews with C-suite executives. Beyond the stage, thoughtful touchpoints were incorporated throughout the space including a milestone wall that invited guests to contribute their own experiences, turning individual perspectives into a united narrative.



02

COLLECTIVE HUSTLE

At SXSW, attendees are absorbing new ideas around the clock, but the work waiting in their inbox doesn't pause for the festival. Although the go-go-go nature of this event makes time feel different, emails still pile up and deadlines continue loom for many attendees. With time at a premium, Logitech came to the rescue with their **Logi Work Lounge**, featuring workstations fully equipped with Logitech mice, keyboards, headsets, webcams, and monitors, creating a space where productivity, conversation, and collaboration could happen in tandem with the festival thrills.



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SNAPPY CASUAL

Centering its presence on skill development, the **Nikon ATX** pop-up served as a hands-on space where attendees could explore and practice photography while connecting aspiring and experienced photographers with industry experts. Nikon specialists and pro creators hosted daily themed events and workshops, giving participants a chance to try the latest Nikon Z series equipment and pick up a few tricks of the trade along the way.



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HOPS AND HEAVYWEIGHTS

The long-standing **Fast Company Grill** operated as one of SXSW's most information-packed lounge spaces— a place to take a beat from the day while still doing your homework on what's next. Anchored by high-caliber speakers like Ben Cohen (Ben & Jerry's), John Stamos (Zeem), RJ Scaringe (Rivian), and Elyse Cohen (Rare Beauty / Rare Impact), the patio became a live feed of brand, culture, and impact thinking from the operators actually shaping the week. Attendees could park for an hour, grab a drink, and walk away with quotable lines and usable frameworks rather than just another wristband.



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FAMILIAR VOICES, TEXAN TWANG

Rivian's **Electric Roadhouse** turned their South Congress flagship into the emotional home base of their SXSW story where vehicle platforms started to feel like a lifestyle platform. The space ran all week as a R2 showcase, hospitality hub, and programming venue: panels like "Building the World We Believe In," "Are You Faster Than a Robot?" demos, local NPR station KUTX's curated day parties with local talent, wellness walks, and coffee literally poured off the tailgate of an R1T. The space functioned as Rivian's living room in the middle of the festival's new, decentralized geography where the brand could quietly underwrite guest comfort and curiosity.



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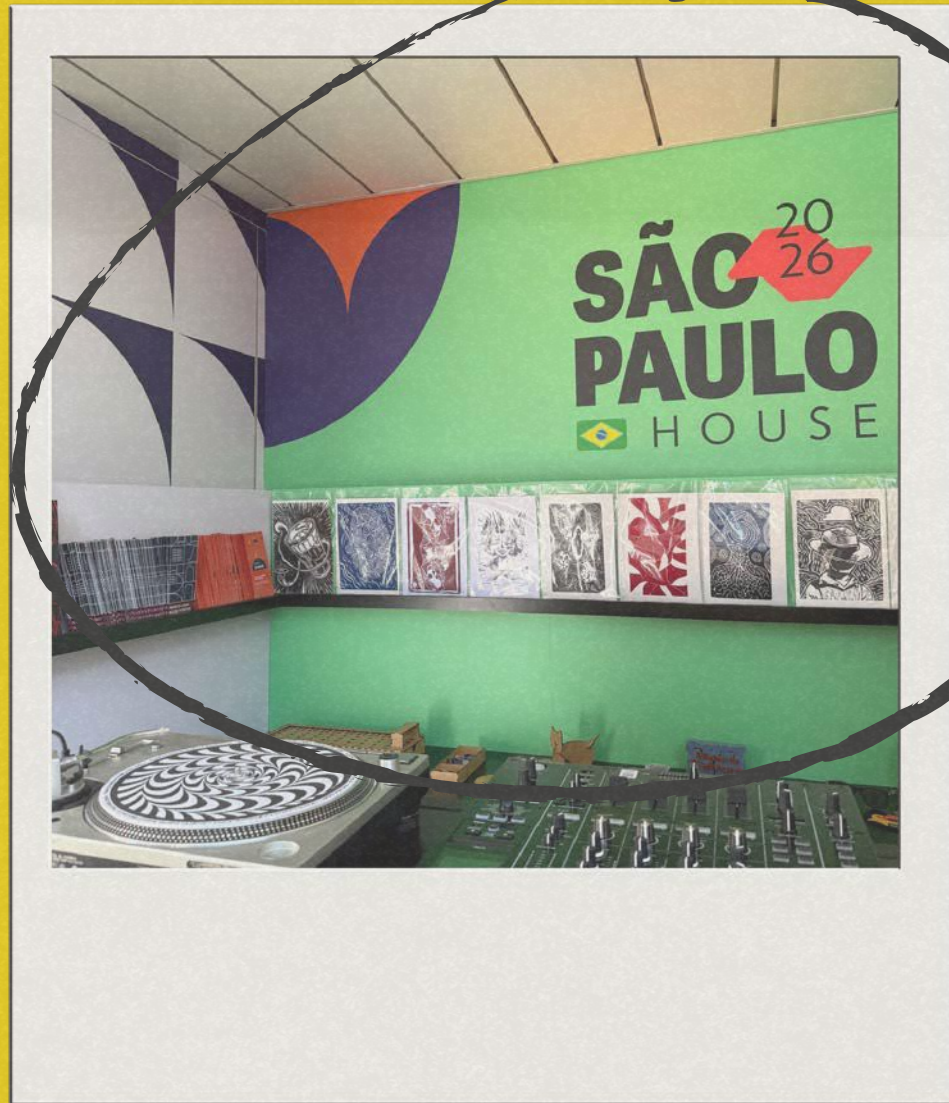
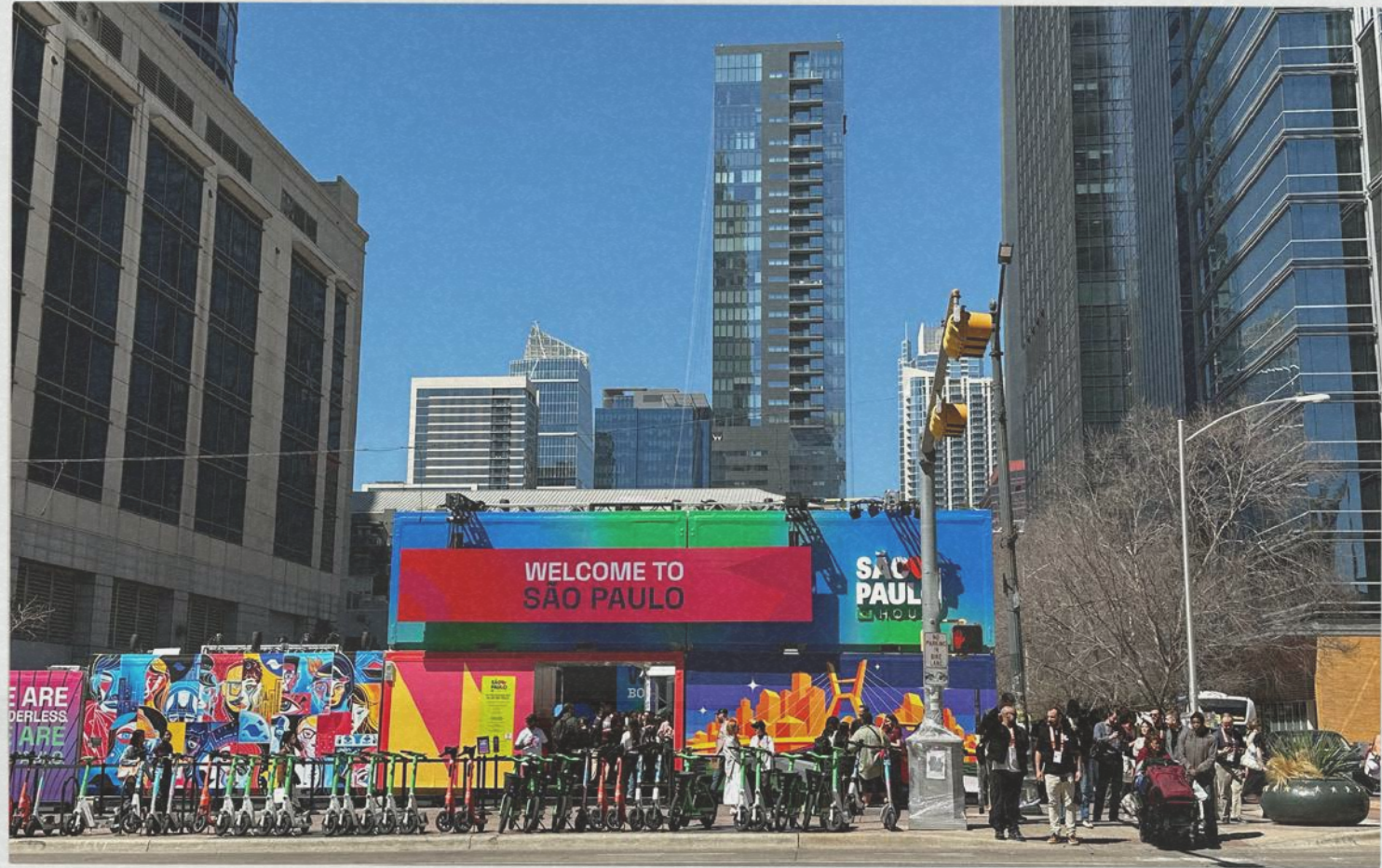
Some choose SXSW for its potential for connectivity in economic sectors going increasingly global. The post-pandemic iteration of the festival has quietly evolved into a true international convening: In 2025, the festival reported attendees from 97 countries and showcasing artists from 56 countries, pointing to the reality that global attendees are now treating SXSW as an industry convergence where they can be exposed to multiple markets, categories, and ways of global thinking all at once. This isn't limited to international attendees, mind you: global citizens living in America attend SXSW for the opportunity to find break-out success in shifting global markets, too.

For this group, the draw of the event is in the global flavor of thinking. Representing a unique niche distinct from the São Paulo Tech Weeks of the modern innovation calendar, SXSW is the distinctive destination where showcase slots, label meetings, film / TV deals, and brand partnerships can collide in a single week, making it a top node for exporting global music campaigns, Brazilian startups, or European mobility brands into North America and beyond. Even amidst a year of upheaval, missing SXSW feels less like skipping a conference and more like skipping a year of progressive thinking.



"I come to SXSW because the people in my industry from around the world attend, too."

Cultural exchange



01 WE ARE BORDERLESS

This year, SXSW veteran São Paulo House billed itself as a “borderless hub where the world meets São Paulo,” placing Brazilian thought-leaders, artists, and policymakers center-stage. It became the buzziest lounge on Congress Avenue for Latin American creatives and investors to convene day and night, but also offered a place where teams could plug directly into Brazil’s ecosystem of talent, creativity, and drive with no teleconferencing link required.

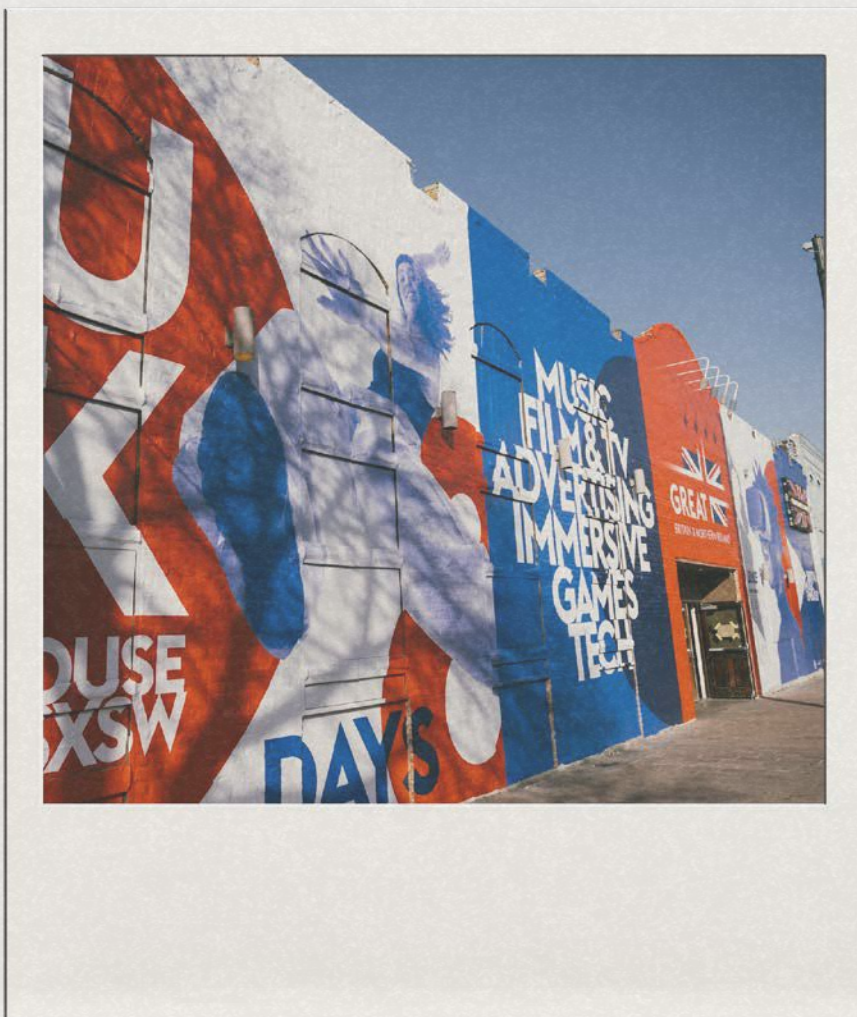
In the macro sense, 2026 saw Brazil lean all the way in on SXSW with record-breaking participation: over 40 companies, multiple state-backed activations like Casa Minas, and sponsorship of Innovation Clubhouse zones. For an attendee chasing global connection, the footprint turned SXSW into an unusually efficient way to map the Brazilian innovation landscape without ever leaving downtown Austin.



02 LONDON CALLING

This year, the UK House ran a tight, two-day “best of modern Britain” program that mixed future-facing tech with cultural flexes. Standout moments included its Super Saturday slate, where leaders from Meta, Epic Games, Magnopus, Wave and others unpacked the tech and business behind immersive entertainment, all demonstrating how the UK is exporting creative IP through new formats.

Another headline moment was co-activating partner BME’s Notting Hill Carnival on Sixth takeover: dancers in full-feathered Carnival costumes paraded through Palm Door’s courtyard and onto the street, while Rampage Sound ran a proper Carnival set (soca, dancehall, afrobeats, and UK club edits, to name a few). For a few hours, the venue felt like a slice of Europe’s biggest street festival, making the UK’s multicultural, diasporic creative engine visible and visceral.



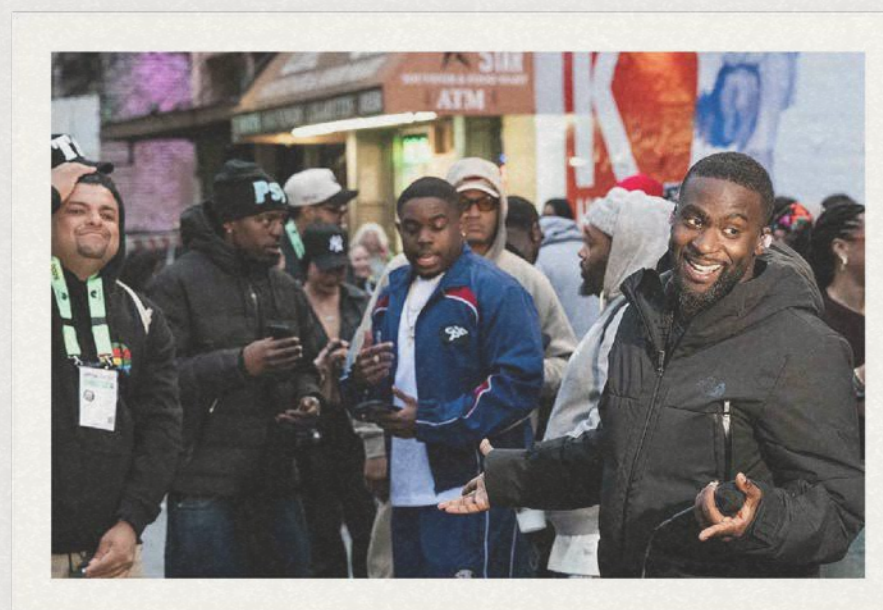
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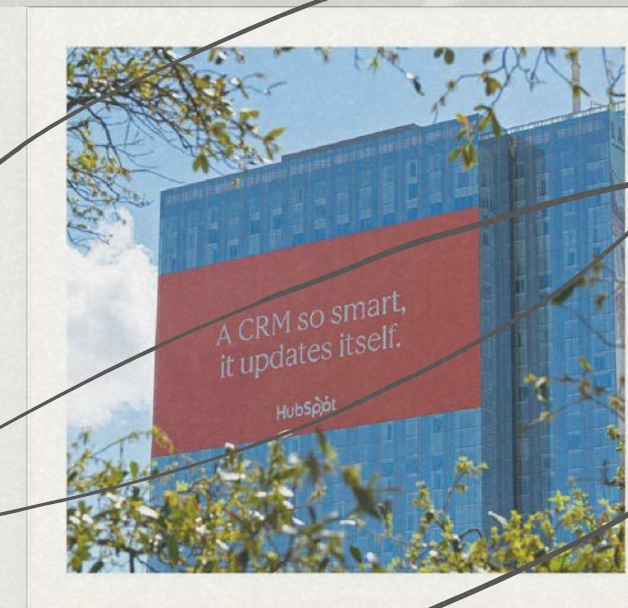
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03 A SEAT AT THE TABLE

HubSpot rented Soho House’s cultural cachet to prototype what an elegant GTM war room looks like in the AI era. Transforming Soho House into a one-day executive clubhouse for GTM and creator leaders, Hubspot House featured founder roundtables and live music as the sun went down. The strategic move was to frame HubSpot as a convener; a brand that can rally high-powered operators into a calm, well-designed space and help them compare how they’re elegantly rewiring their businesses around AI and creator-led growth. Hosting at Soho House signals that this is where the unscripted conversations about scaling a business happen— all while HubSpot quietly positions itself as the orange layer that makes it all possible.



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IF IT MOVES, KICK IT

Vox Creative and Verizon used nostalgia and storytelling to kick off the “next era” of U.S. soccer fandom with Soccer Meets America, a series that traces how a fringe sport became a multi-continent obsession in the U.S. The space framed that history as a shared, real-time conversation between fans and insiders about the moments that built today’s supporter culture. A 90s-inspired lounge, foosball, and World Cup ticket giveaway united 90s nostalgia, 2026 host-country hype, and always-on streaming fandom into a single environment. Verizon’s role as Official Telecom Partner felt like a natural extension of the story as the brand quietly stitching together past memories, present watch habits, and the next wave of World Cup superfan energy into one continuous feed.



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IMAGINATION, REPROJECTED

Redbreast quietly leveraged SXSW to own the presence of an independently agile global film fund with exceptional taste. Enter the Redbreast Unhidden Bar, an on-brand speakeasy designed for evenings full of discovery, surprises, and the brand’s annual short film Showcase. This year, Indian filmmaker Pranav Bhasin’s We Were Here was selected by actor Andrew Scott as the winning short, lending a deeply local story an explicitly global runway. Framing the experience of both speakeasy and showcase around the idea that “the most rewarding finds are often hidden” enabled Redbreast to tie its own slow, craft-first philosophy to the reality of independent film, where great work often takes years to surface and needs someone with reach to bring it into the light.



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“First!”

The “first!” attendee treats SXSW like a live beta test for culture— they want to see the band, show, tech, or brand world before it hits everyone else’s feed. To them, status isn’t built on velvet-rope exclusivity, but on temporal advantage; that is, being a few months or years ahead of the rest in what they’ve seen, tried, learned, and formed an opinion on. This motivation lends them the energy needed to queue for buzzy premieres, first-of-their-kind IP builds, and unusual side activations because the upside is narrative ownership later. Underneath it all is a pretty clear operating system: they come to SXSW to see what’s next in-person so that back home, they step into the role of a knowledge broker involved in how it trickles out to the world (or just theirs).



"I attend SXSW because I want to form my own opinion on the ground level of what's happening, not inherit someone else's take later on."

This year, this festival-goer made a point to maximize their coverage. Each space, encounter, and show represents its own dimension of the prism where work, entertainment, mobility, and culture might be headed. They gravitated toward new formats and far-flung offsites precisely because those could become the thing everyone references next year— and if they don't, they're a learning opportunity. They constantly toggled between immersion and documentation so they could turn raw impressions into "lessons from the ground" within 24 hours. The experience is the research, but the endgame is thought leadership, enabling them to come away with sharp, ownable takes before everyone else catches up.





01 R2-DEBUT

To kick off the launch of their latest electric SUV, Rivian terraformed the street of a downtown Austin block to prove a point: no matter where you are, the R2 is designed for the adventurous. Using SXSW as the backdrop for the full trim and pricing reveal turned the festival into a live testing ground that literally stopped people (and downtown traffic) in their tracks. The automaker shut down a full block of Congress and dropped in their Electric Joyride activation, a 270-foot off-road course complete with dirt piles, berms, and an unusually lofty view of the Capitol building. In this case, the first time most people saw the R2, it wasn't rotating on a stand— it was kicking up dust in front of the Capitol. The subtext was almost wry: you're probably not driving out to a canyon to test this thing, so Rivian brought the canyon to your commute and let you feel the thrill of being in "adventure mode" without ever leaving the SXSW grid.

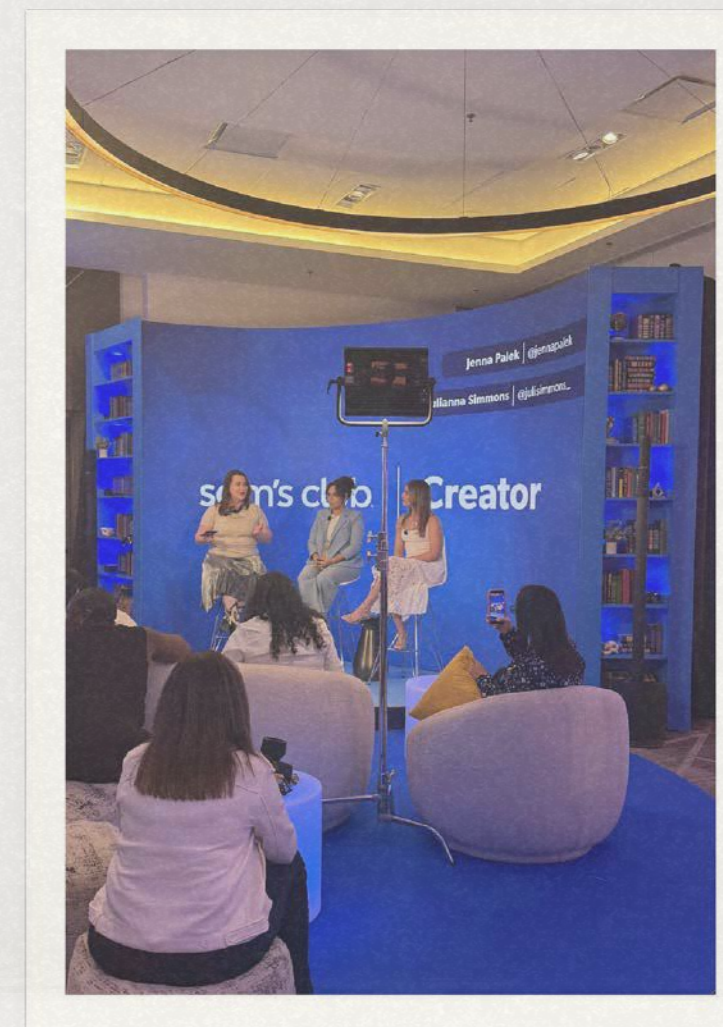
02

THE WILD WILD WEB

Yahoo took over the Historic Scout Inn and skinned it as the **Yahoo Scout Inn**, a Western-flavored home base for their AI-powered answer engine, Scout. But the story felt bigger than a simple motif: SXSW (and today's world, more broadly) can feel like the wild west of information overload, so Yahoo gave people a place to venture out, reset, and remember what exploration feels like. The mix of wellness, games, performance, and discovery gave attendees multiple on-ramps: you could come for a free night show and leave with a sense that Yahoo is back in the business of helping you find the good stuff. Here, Yahoo put a stake in the ground to say their approach to AI is about guided wandering— someone to ride alongside you through the chaos, not replace the ride altogether.



02



03



02

03

SAMPLE WHAT'S NEXT

The **Sam's Club's Creator Lounge and Academy** treated creators less like a media buy and more like a member class that the brand wants to invest in for the long haul. Set in a corner of the Marriott, the space blended a Member's Mark coffee bar, working space, and programming that positioned Sam's Club's new Creator Program as infrastructure rather than just a payout link. Bringing in Jordan Howlett to headline a session on the "Participation Era" gave the experience a lived example with serious pull. Overall, this homebase-like presence showed that Sam's Club isn't just courting creators, it's trying to become the space where internet-native storytellers stock up on career fuel— ideas, tools, and tactics— under one roof.



03

04



WORLD OF MANY WORLDS

Paramount+ used **The Lodge**, a festival mainstay on Austin's Rainey Street, to prove it can still own the classic "network" role in a streaming-first world. The three-level takeover of Clive Bar turned a familiar SXSW watering hole into a content playground, complete with a UFC walkout tunnel, *Survivor 50* throwback moments, a *Landman* oilfield adventure, plus spaces nodding to the platform's tentpole IP across sports, drama, and genre. The Lodge worked on two dimensions: superfans got to step into specific shows and leave with shareable proof, while more casual festival-goers walked away with a refreshed mental playlist of "oh right, that's on Paramount+ too."

05



WHERE WORDS FAIL, MUSIC SPEAKS

JBL treated SXSW like a living lab for how music is actually discovered now, and headliner DJ Steve Aoki was the perfect upbeat bridge into that story. As the festival's Official Audio Partner, JBL built the Livebrary at 3TEN as a zen-like listening library: silent stacks were swapped for listening stations, new tour and open-ear headphones everywhere, and sets from LP Giobbi, Steve Aoki, and JBL Music Academy artists that turned the space into a proof point for "we back artists reaching their inflection points." Outside that core, JBL threaded themselves through SXSW's music spine— run clubs, panels on building pathways for emerging artists, and high-fidelity support for showcases, to name a few— establishing the brand as the sound system powering the week.



**Steal
These**



Not every brand belongs at SXSW — and the ones that don't figure that out fast. But the ones that do belong? They tend to follow a few unspoken rules that separate the memorable from the merely present. After watching what worked (and, bless their hearts, what didn't), we distilled it down to four strategic moves worth stealing before 2027 hits your planning calendar.

Read the room



SXSW isn't just another tech conference with entertainment on the side. It's a cultural event that brands get to participate in if they earn it. And it works because people show up as their full selves. They're not just a job title for a week. They're a music fan, foodie, a founder, a creative, all at once. Here, brands must design with range, since they're meeting people across every identity they bring with them.

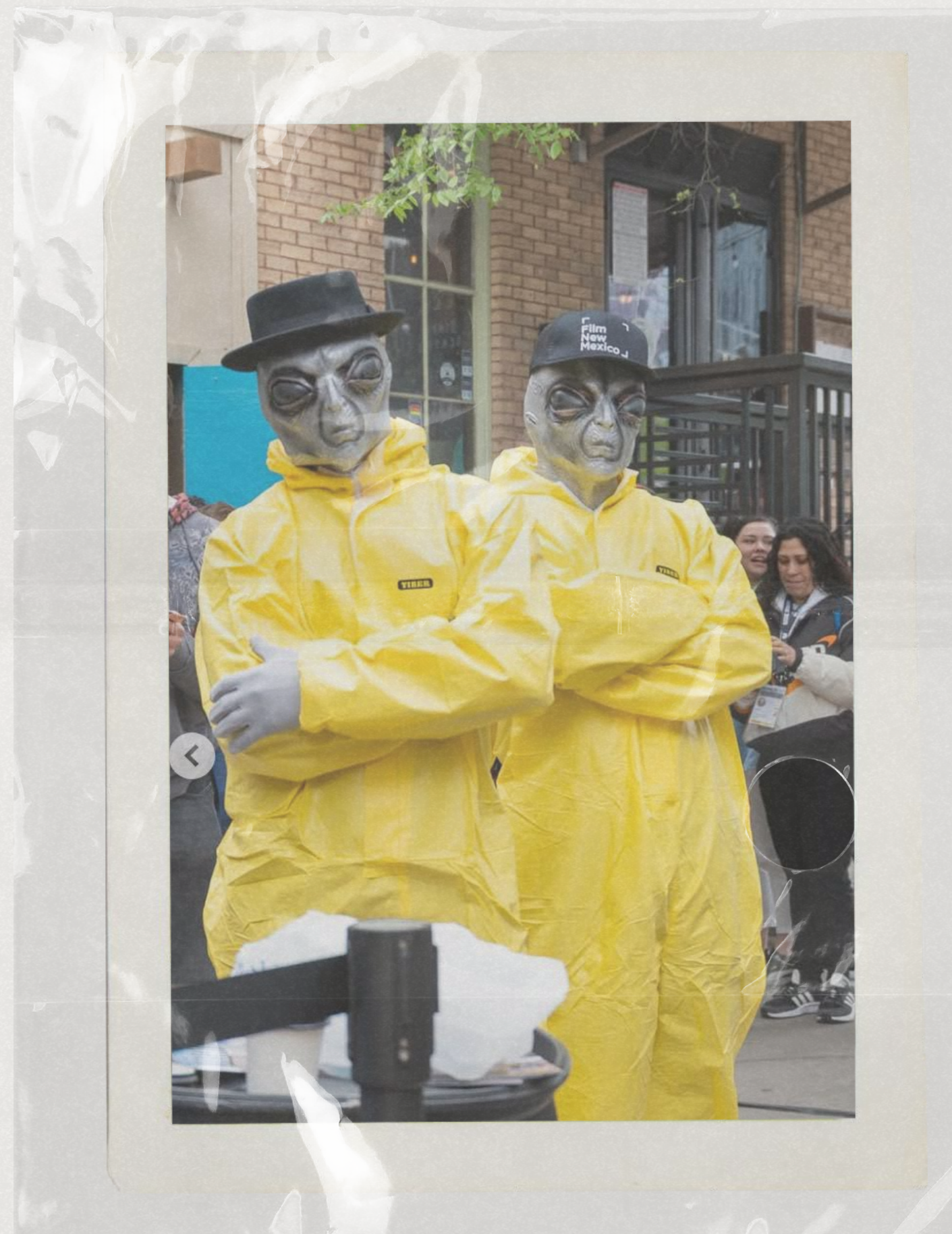
At most conferences, your competition is the booth across the aisle. At SXSW, it's an unannounced set that becomes the night's main character within minutes of hitting socials, or happy hour meet up the entire city was already in the know about.

before joining it

The brands that made an impression this year didn't outspend that energy. They joined it. What catches a lot of first-timers off guard is how much business actually happens here. The B2B audience isn't hiding. They're just not where you'd expect them. They're at the cultural houses, the afterparties, the programming that has nothing to do with their day job. The informal setting is the point. Relationships start in rooms people chose to be in, not rooms they were assigned to.



Make it worth the word of mouth



Other shows sell the future. SXSW premieres the now. And that distinction matters. Streaming platforms like Paramount and Prime figured this out years ago, turning the festival into launch excitement for their biggest titles. The playbook is the same for brands, just underused. A premiere doesn't have to be a product reveal. It can be an argument, a point of view, a partnership that nobody saw coming. What falls flat is recycling. If your activation could run at any conference in any city without changing a single detail, Austin will sniff it out. This is a city that rallies behind "Keep Austin Weird" for a reason. The audiences here reward originality and they have limited patience for anything that feels less than that standard.

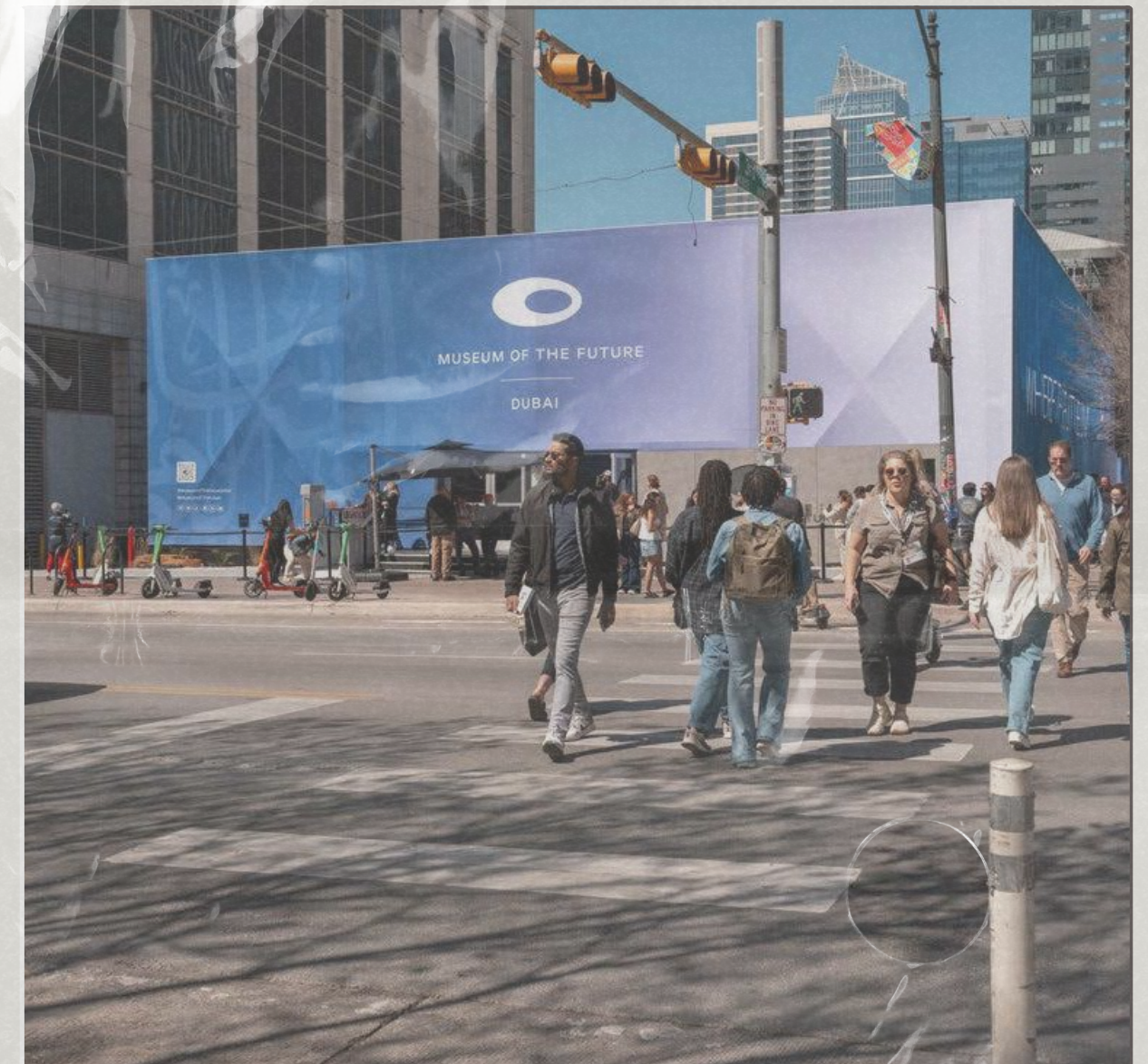


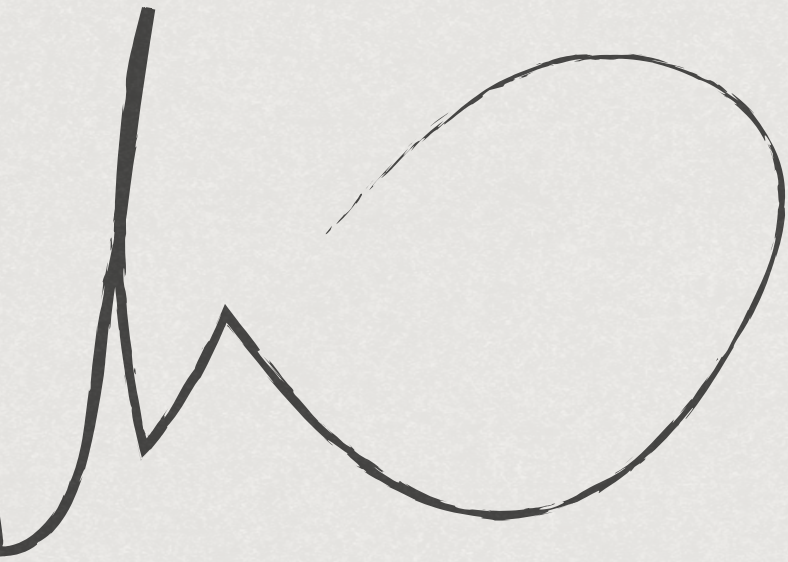
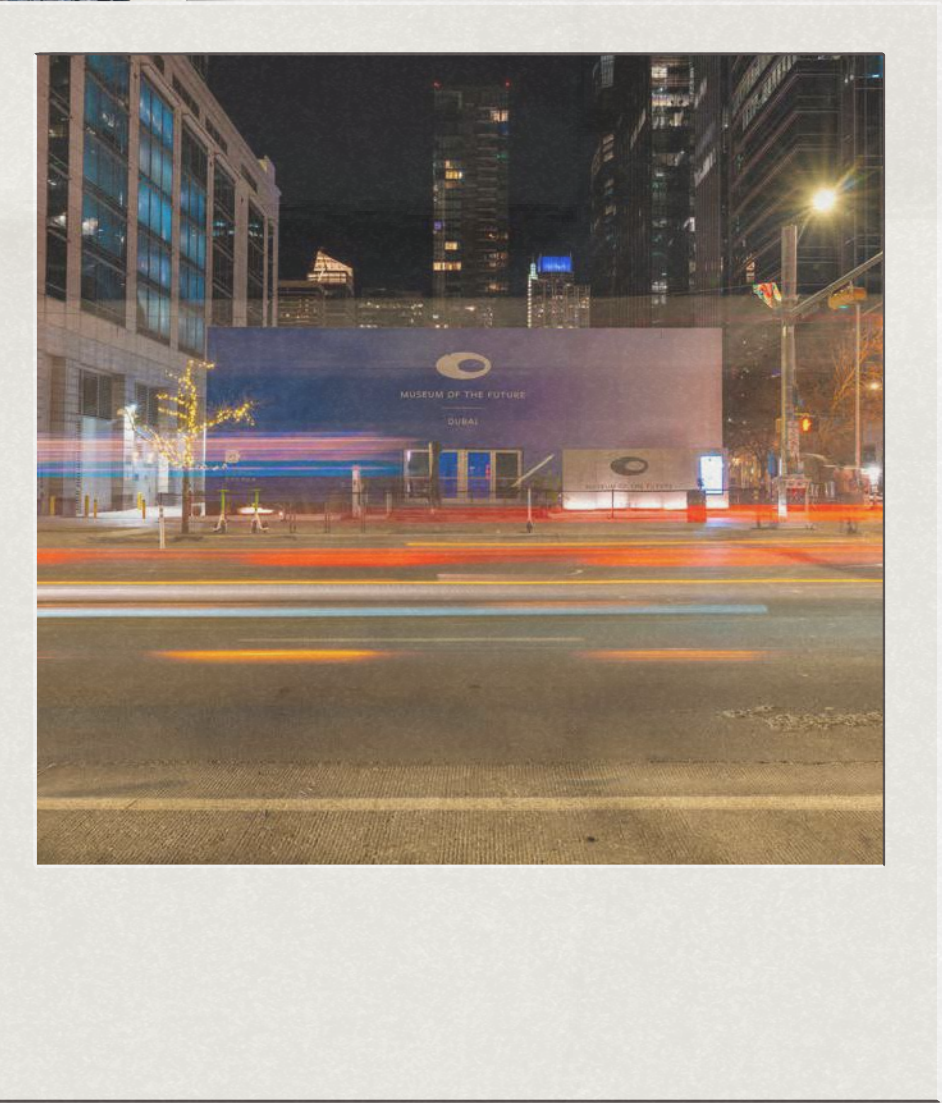
Turn a block into your brand

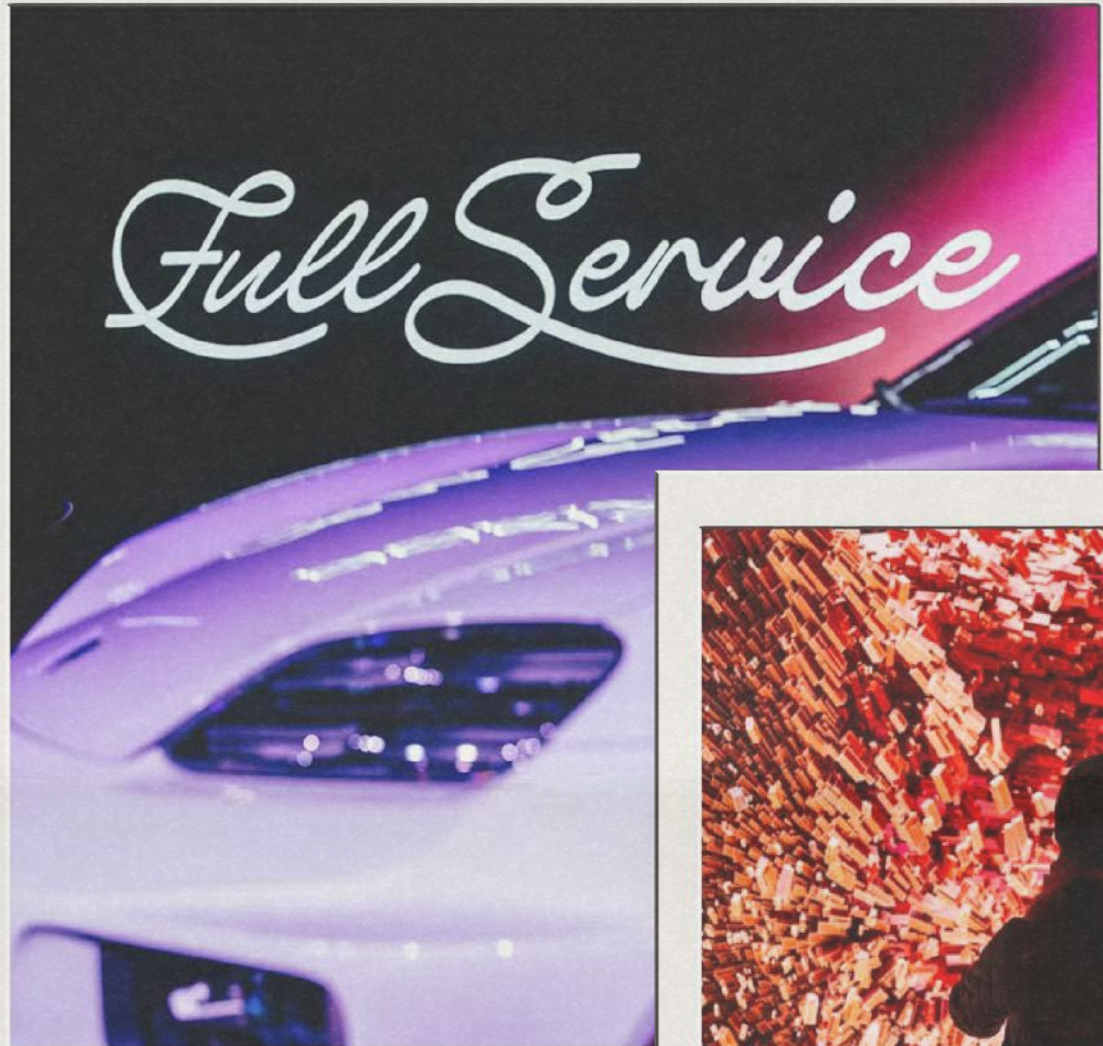
One great quirk about SXSW is that there are truly no rules about where you can activate.

Want to take over a restaurant or coffee bar? Do it! Reskin or rebrand it, while you're at it. Want to fill a warehouse? Sky's the limit! But think of the festival's energy as a campfire. Too far from it, and nobody will find you. Too close, and you risk getting drowned out by everything else competing for the same crowd. Production isn't the only big decision-making factor that goes into being here — location logistics and familiarity with the different neighborhoods can also provide value based on your goals.

Pinpointing the right site in the right part of the city can elevate and influence everything downstream: audience flow, programming, and, most importantly, visibility. And if you're building anything outdoors in Texas in March, always have a plan B— weather will humble a production timeline faster than any permit office will.







Arrive with intent

Looking ahead, SXSW 2027 is planned to span seven days. That's more than most brands can sustain financially or creatively. The energy across the festival is not evenly distributed, and neither are the audiences. Badge fragmentation is real. Music, film, and innovation crowds don't always overlap the way you'd expect, and general public adds another layer entirely. Understanding which audience you're designing for, and when they're most likely in the mix, is what separates a strategic activation from an expensive week of hoping for the best.

The best activations don't just serve the brand. They enhance the festival experience for the people who show up. That means designing around when your audience is actually there and what would make their day better. Whether it's a multi-day flagship, a concentrated moment around a designated focal point, or a targeted hospitality play in the right room, they all require conviction — and a clear point of view about what success actually looks like.



a

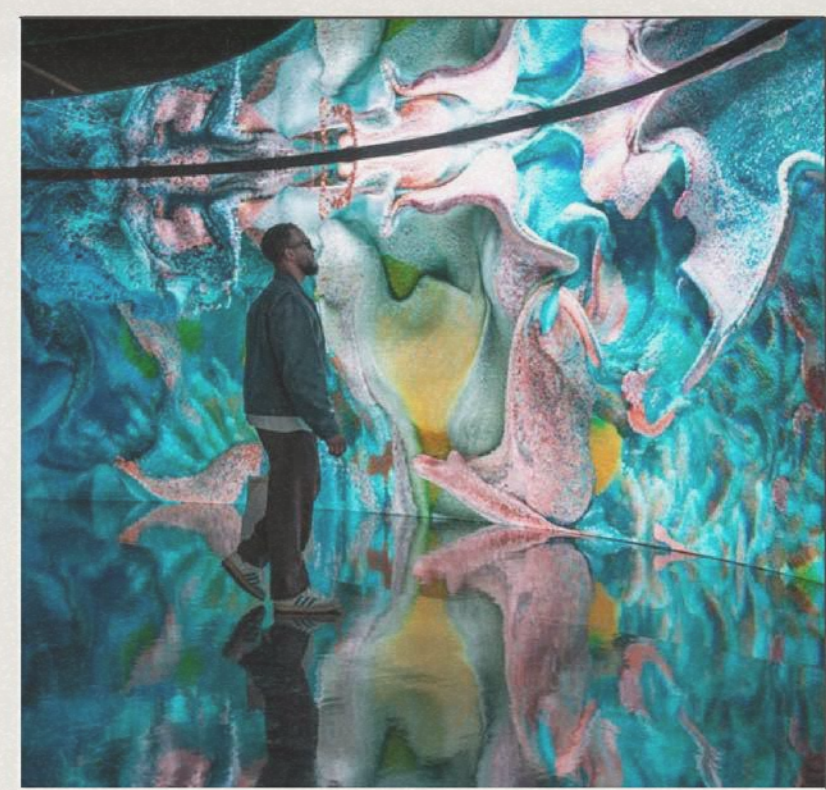
Photo Courtesy Museum of the Future.

SXSW
Dubai Is Making a Splash at SXSW 2025 With Groundbreaking 'Museum of the Future'

The five-day immersive experience will feature chocolate from TikTok sensation FIX Dessert Chocolatier and artwork from famed Refik Anadol.

FADER

Inside Common's SXSW party with Porsche and The FADER



It all boils down to the value equation. The brands that win at SXSW aren't the ones who tried to do everything — they're the ones who decided what mattered, committed to it completely, and made something worth remembering. Volume, throughput, that talked-about social moment on the back end — any of those can be the goal. You just have to pick one and mean it.

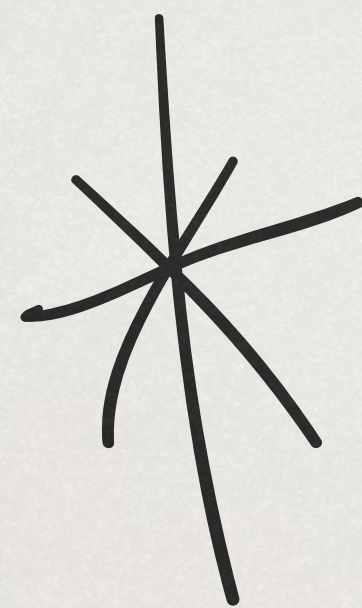
Your SXS 2027 era

starts now

The brands that show up and land at SXS don't figure it out in Q4. They start now — with the right partner, the right strategy, and enough runway to build something worth talking about.
That's where we come in.

[START THE CONVERSATION](#)





Contributors



Caroline Lee

SENIOR STRATEGIST

Caroline Lee is a senior strategist and writer who helps brands author incredible stories. For nearly a decade, she has worked alongside multidisciplinary creative teams to explore the intersection of design, storytelling, experience, and humanity, creating moments of consequence for world-changing brands. Her work aims to design human-centric experiences that deeply resonate with people, drawing heavily from the narrative and systems design found in the video games she loves to play.



Roxanne Mehdizadeh

STRATEGIST

Roxanne is on a mission to meaningfully connect people and brands through immersive platforms. Fueled by curiosity, she draws inspiration from exploring the world around her, along with Internet scavenger hunts, to craft compelling experiences that provoke genuine action and deep connections. Roxanne was recently named one of BizBash's Fresh Faces of 2025, recognized for both her impact now and the mark she's poised to make on the future of experiential.



Kiré Davis

SENIOR STRATEGIST

Kiré creates trade show programs across tech, healthcare, and consumer brands. He solves a problem most strategists face: how to think big without losing the plot. He's honed that instinct through his background in interdisciplinary research, applied analytics, and retail strategy, creating the conditions for sharper insights, stronger creative, and competitive positioning that sets brands apart.



Lexi Corn

VP, MARKETING

Lexi oversees brand strategy, voice, and visual identity across the Czarnowski Collective multi-studio ecosystem. A former creative director and copywriter with 20+ years of experience, she brings bold ideas, sharp instincts, and a bit of "strategic mischief" to campaigns, content, sponsorships, events, and more. She also co-founded The Broadroom, the company's internal community for women in experiential - because when she's not shaping the work, she's working to shape the industry.



SXSW 2026 **THE INSIDER REPORT**

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