

# Adweek's 2020 Experiential Awards Honor Taco Bell Hotel, HBO Activations and More

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Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, experiential was one of marketing's most dynamic and rapidly growing fields. Now the industry is exploring what form such activations can safely and effectively take going forward, and our second annual Experiential Awards suddenly carry an extra layer of celebration—and unexpected poignancy.

After all, the campaigns honored by this year's awards were all dreamed up before social distancing, back when the only parameters were the limits of one's imagination. Was last year a high water mark for experiential, or will 2020 mark a moment of profound transition that leads to new heights? It remains to be seen. In the meantime, Adweek is excited to highlight these truly remarkable experiential executives and activations, a wildly diverse set of immersive scenarios that range from a Taco Bell-themed hotel in the middle of the desert to fictional nuns touring the country in a Beelzebus to promote an Amazon Prime Video original series.

**Experiential Brand of the Year**

*HBO*



HBO's "Bleed for the Throne" SXSW activation in 2019

With zeitgeist-grabbing series like Game of Thrones and Westworld on its schedule, HBO has had a sky-high bar to clear for real-life extensions of those "incredibly immersive" dramas.

The network has, in the past year, launched a global scavenger hunt, organized mass blood donations and created a fake technology startup for experiential programs that are "a critical part of our marketing mix," says Zach Enterlin, evp, program marketing and creative services, noting the goal is "to develop a deeper connection with our fans."

Those viewers, already on board with the premium channel's ad-free environment and "It's not TV" positioning, are tough to reach with traditional means. And they're unlikely to respond to typical stunts that aren't closely tied to their favorite shows' DNA.

That could explain why some 30,000 people traveled 3 million miles in a quest #ForTheThrone and a seat at the final season premiere. Also in the name of their Game of Thrones obsession, more than 350,000 fans spilled their own blood for the

American Red Cross, which “galvanized our fan base as a force for good,” says Enterlin.

And via Incite, Westworld’s evil corporate overlord come to life, select techies peeked into the future of data gathering, with spine-tingling results.

According to Enterlin, HBO’s events aim for “a deep sense of authenticity to the world of the show, a sharp focus on innovation and a constant emphasis on quality.” –*T.L. Stanley*

### **Use of Celebrity/Use of Out-of-Home Media Activation by a Media Brand**

*Awkwafina 7 Train Takeover*

Brand: Comedy Central

Agency: OutFront Media, Posterscope

In January, when commuting on the subway in New York was still common, riders on the 7 train were treated to some humorous announcements from a voice that sounded like Awkwafina’s—because it actually was. The comedian and actress became the MTA’s first celebrity announcer as part of Comedy Central’s promotion of her new series, *Awkwafina Is Nora From Queens*. The network teamed with MTA’s advertising partner OutFront Media and location-based marketing agency Posterscope for the weeklong promotion.

Awkwafina announced facts about each stop on the 7, which runs from Flushing, Queens, to Hudson Yards in Manhattan. The announcements included tidbits like, “This is 33rd Street. In other news, 33 is a palindrome. Wait. Can numbers be palindromes?” and a PSA to stop manspreading. According to the MTA, the promotion was slated to kick off a celebrity-announcer pilot program. But with the city still under lockdown and ridership down more than 90%, it’s unclear when trains will get a new guest conductor. –*Ian Zelaya*

### **Brave Heart Award, Pop-Up Activation \$1 Million to \$2 Million**

*The Bell: A Taco Bell Hotel and Resort*

Brand: Taco Bell

Agency: UEG Worldwide and Edelman

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