At SXSW 2025, Think Like a Trendspotter, Not a Marketer

South by Southwest is where tech, culture, and creativity collide—but it isn't a marketing conference. The real value for marketers isn't just in the panels, but also in observing the cultural trends, making unexpected connections, and experiencing firsthand how brands are trying to capture attention.

With SXSW 2025 kicking off, here's a roadmap to getting the most out of your experience in Austin.

Go for the trends, not just the talks

Based on panel topics, brand activations, and social media discussions, these themes are emerging as dominant forces at SXSW this year.

AI moves from hype to practicality

AI remains the dominant theme across panels and activations, but this year, the focus has shifted from hype to execution. Attendees want to see how AI is enhancing creativity, consumer engagement, and real-world applications rather than just serving as a novelty.

Sessions like AI, Music & Creativity in the Imagination Age with Holly Herndon will explore how AI is augmenting human creativity, while futurist Amy Webb's Tech Trends Report 2025 keynote is expected to reveal where AI's next breakthroughs will be.

Across SXSW, AI is being positioned as a tool for augmentation, not replacement, signaling a more mature approach to the technology.

Cultural relevance and storytelling

Brands and creators are focusing on authenticity and storytelling over pure tech spectacle. Marketing experts at SXSW point to “purpose fatigue” with shallow campaigns and the need for deeper engagement.

A standout session, From FOMO to Fulfillment: The Science of Consumer Behavior, will explore how consumers are moving from impulse-driven consumption to values-based engagement. This shift is pushing brands to create authentic, resonant storytelling rather than chase trends.

In another must-see panel, Entertain or Die: Entertainment-First Brand Building, Andy Pearson of Liquid Death and James Kuczynski of Duolingo will discuss how they break through the traditional advertising malaise by “earning fame for your brand by entertaining at all costs.”

The continued rise of creator-led brand engagement

The creator economy is no longer just an add-on to brand strategy. It’s a primary driver of engagement.

Beyond the Buzz: Mastering Creator Economy Trends with Jasmine Engberg, vp and principal analyst at eMarketer, will highlight how brands like McDonald’s, Duolingo, and Airbnb are integrating creators into their marketing ecosystems in more meaningful ways. You’ll find me there, and you’ll also find me at Fans & Fandom: The Creatorsphere is Now the Center of Cultural Relevance featuring Evan Shapiro, media cartographer and go-to thought leader in entertainment.

AR, VR, and metaverse reinvention

After a lull in metaverse buzz, SXSW 2025 reframes it with realism. Discussions focus on practical uses of AR and VR in entertainment, gaming, and retail, often powered by AI.

One session entitled The Metaverse 2025: Revival and Reinvention dives into how decentralized tech, XR, and gaming are shaping a reinvented metaverse.

Seek out the most buzz-worthy brand activations

SXSW isn't just about what's happening on stage, it's about how brands are showing up across Austin. These cultural moments serve as case studies in consumer engagement, cultural relevance, and experiential storytelling.

Amazon Prime Video's Immersive Hotel Takeover – Hotel San José, March 7–8

Amazon Prime Video is transforming Hotel San José into a multiroom experience celebrating its women-led original series, including The Summer I Turned Pretty and Another Simple Favor. Featuring elaborate set recreations, a Prime Bookstore Café with the books that inspired its shows, and interactive elements, this activation has been dominating SXSW anticipation posts on TikTok and Instagram.

FX's Alien Wreckage Experience – 318 E. 5th Street, March 7–8

FX is making a major impact with a large-scale activation promoting Alien: Earth. The experience features a crashed spaceship installation, life-sized alien specimens, and interactive content. Early buzz compares it to past SXSW standouts, like HBO's Westworld activation, and suggests this will be one of the most visually striking and immersive activations of the year.

Whataburger Museum of Art – Wanderlust Wine Co., March 8–9

Celebrating its 75th anniversary, Whataburger is embracing fan culture with a museum-style exhibit showcasing over 200 pieces

of consumer-created artwork. The activation includes highly shareable elements like the Whataburger Day Dot Room and a Table Tent Mugshot Wall, tapping into local nostalgia and brand affinity. Texas-based creators are already driving significant buzz around this activation.

Dubai Future Foundation's AI Chocolate and Tech Showcase – Congress Ave & 3rd Street, March 7–11

Dubai's Museum of the Future is bringing its viral AI-designed green chocolate to SXSW, creating immediate curiosity online. Personally, this is the one I am most excited about, as I have seen countless TikToks with the characteristic "crack" of someone breaking into the mouth-watering chocolate. The activation will also feature AI-generated art from digital visual artist Refik Anadol, holographic displays, and futuristic tech concepts, positioning it as one of the most intriguing activations for those following innovation and emerging technology.

Rivian's Electric Ice Cream Trucks and Pop-up – South Congress, all week

Rivian is merging sustainability with consumer experience by deploying electric-powered Ben & Jerry's ice cream trucks throughout Austin. At its South Congress space, Rivian will showcase its latest EV models in a California desert-inspired setting. This activation is generating strong pre-event buzz, especially among sustainability advocates and automotive enthusiasts.

JBL's Music Lounge and Secret Shows – Various locations

JBL is making a major play to integrate its brand more tightly with the music scene with several activations at SXSW. These will include secret performances at the Rolling Stone Future of Music showcase, influencer meetups, and interactive listening lounges featuring the latest JBL audio technology.

Early social chatter suggests this will be a key highlight for both music lovers and brand marketers.

SXSW is a mindset, not a to-do list

SXSW is more about immersion than checking off panels. The best insights come from observing, listening, and engaging in the right conversations.

To that end, a few unofficial events of note include The Female Quotient Lounge (March 8–9), where last year, I had the unforgettable experience of meeting Kara Swisher, and Brand Innovators (March 7–10), which serves as the de facto brand marketers reunion tour, bringing together some of the most influential voices in the industry.

How marketers can maximize their SXSW experience

Be present: You will overschedule, and that’s normal. Make space for unexpected surprise connections that become VIP moments.

Think like a trendspotter, not a marketer: Watch how attendees engage with brand activations and take note of which cultural conversations are gaining traction.

Follow the social buzz: Platforms like Reddit, X, and TikTok will be the best sources for real-time reactions to panels and activations.

Look beyond official events: Some of the most creative activations and pop-ups aren’t on the official schedule. Watch for hidden gems.

Follow up fast: SXSW is about networking, but the real value comes after the event. Make sure to connect with new contacts

while the energy is still fresh.

The most valuable takeaways for marketers won’t just come from panel discussions, but from immersing in the real-world conversations happening across Austin.

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