Next-Tech Leaders Share How They're Navigating Rapidly Changing Consumer Needs at CES 2021

The demands of the pandemic era have forced both introspection and innovation among digital brands. For marketers, that means knowing when to push the envelope and and when to play it safe in an unpredictable market.

At the CES event "Consumer-Driven Demands on Next-Gen Tech," speakers from Snap, Universal Music Group, Visible and TimeHop acknowledged their role in reimagining the digital economy. At the same time, they're cognizant of maintaining a sense of connectivity among users, who are accustomed to high-performing technology and rapid innovation. Here are some key takeaways from the event.

Replacing live experiences

When live experiences suddenly shut down early in the pandemic, Universal Music Group aimed to counter those losses through heightened consumer engagement, according to head of brand partnerships Richard Yaffa.

This year, Universal Music Group teamed up with Facebook Gaming for a live-streamed and interactive "bragging rights" NBA tournament. Even as brands look to the post-pandemic period, experiences that blend in-person and virtual components, such as live music and e-commerce, will be a central demand from consumers, Yaffa said.

Visible, the first digital-only wireless carrier brand in the

United States, has also placed music at the center of its brand, according to CMO Minjae Ormes. In 2020, Visible set a standard for pandemic-proof music festivals through a three-day event that surpassed expectations by attracting 9 million people, according to Ormes.

“As a marketer, it really got us thinking about what we learn from here,” she said. “What new ideas does this give us to be able to partner with venues and artists and bring something like this again in the future?”

Taking calculated risks

For nostalgia app TimeHop, it would have been pretty easy to play it safe this year, according to the brand’s chief operating officer, Rick Webb. Instead, his team decided to try something new by integrating news into a platform that has traditionally maintained a more lighthearted image.

“We started educating our users around the other side of history in America,” said Webb. “We didn’t have to do that, but we took a gamble that users weren’t there for pure escapism and that they are also reevaluating the past.”

Webb was also candid about the reality of surviving as a brand in this market, sharing that this year has been a prime example of “radical improvisation.” Snap has responded to this immediate pressure to stay engaged with consumers by leaning into augmented reality.

As for pushing the envelope with new technology, Webb stressed that building partnerships and utilizing resources that already exist is a smart move in this market.

“This year is not the year to decide to academically build something from scratch just because you think you might be able to do it better,” he said.” If someone else has already built it, we will happily use it.”

Understanding the ‘Snapchat Generation’

In a 2020 research study on Gen Z and young millennials, Snap found that 82% of its users believe they have a personal responsibility to engage in activism. In 2020, the brand proved its understanding of the “Snapchat Generation” through in-app voter registration, helping over 1.3 million people register to vote, according to Mitchell.

“It is a really special community, and I think brands will need to be mindful of how they engage with them knowing some of their behaviors and beliefs,” said Snap CMO Kenny Mitchell. “This is how this generation really engages and becomes educated. We anticipate that this trend will continue into 2021.”

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