



You know it was an incredible event when you can't wait to get home and share your experience with others — so here I am, at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, typing my thoughts into my laptop on the counter of The Beerdrop Bar.



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I had the chance to attend **SXSW '25** this past week on behalf of The Expo Group. As a first-timer, I was excited and eager to dive into the organized chaos – and it certainly lived up to the hype.

SXSW brings together creatives and professionals from the arts, tech, and marketing sectors, offering a massive range of content and experiences to explore. After countless insightful sessions, immersive activations, and overcoming some **serious FOMO**, I felt

incredibly validated by all the strategic work we've been doing at The Expo Group. Nearly everything I took away from **SXSW aligns with the leading principles** we already follow when designing and producing the hundreds of events and conferences for our partners each year.

Now, for the good stuff – I'm excited to share my top five takeaways from SXSW '25 as an event designer, planner, and producer.

GREAT EVENTS CONNECT COMMUNITIES

We can learn a lot from the many urban planners and architects who shape our local communities while creating spaces that bring people together. Their same principles apply to event design, and SXSW was a perfect example of how to create an **authentic community-centered experience**.

I quickly realized I wasn't just an attendee, but part of the SXSW community.

With each activation and session, it became clear that this massive event was incredibly interconnected, despite the diverse tracks, interests, and goals of each attendee. This hit home when I was in line for the São Paulo House activation and a group of Brazilian gentlemen asked me a question in Portuguese. After a brief pause and an embarrassing display of my limited

Portuguese, we switched to English and discovered two things:

- We all work in creative roles, despite being in different fields and different parts of the world, and
- 2. It was all our first time at the festival, and all shared the exact same sense of excitement to be a part of it.

As event professionals, we should aim to perfect this same "community architecting" that SXSW does so well. Great events do more than gather people, they create spaces where we feel connected and valued. As I summarized this takeaway in my notes, I couldn't help but think to myself that it's no fluke that the tagline of The Expo Group is:

"Architects for connecting communities"

because that's exactly what we set out to do.
 Experiencing the community at SXSW made me value this guiding principle even more.



PERSONALIZATION IS POWERFUL

Personalization is everywhere today, from curating your perfect playlist to tailoring your social media presence - this demand for customized experiences extends to events as well. At SXSW, it was key to creating a memorable experience. The infrastructure allowed attendees to choose from various "tracks" based on their interests, whether in arts, tech, or marketing, giving them the freedom to explore beyond their initial focus. This flexibility made each participant's experience **unique and meaningful**.

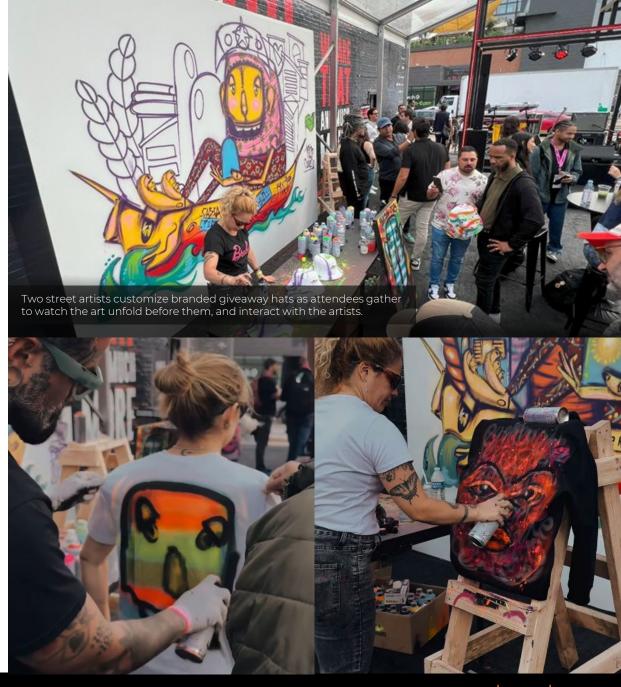
Not only did the event offer hundreds of sessions and activations, but it also showcased personalization in **attendee engagement**. One example of this was a sponsored street artist pop-up, where attendees watched two artists spray-paint branded hats, each adding their unique style with personal techniques and color choices. One artist used a splatter technique reminiscent of Jackson Pollock, while the other carefully created color gradients, blending colors together. After watching the artists create several hats, attendees were

invited to approach the tables and choose one to take home with them.

SXSW demonstrated that personalization is key to bringing more value to your audience and community.

Whether it be different tracks to choose from or activations that offer customization. When attendees can shape their own journey, events are more engaging, productive, and successful.

This is why personalization is one of the top trends in *The People Report* – a publication by The Expo Group, fueled by our CROWDPulse engine – that serves as our North Star in how we design and produce.







MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES REQUIRE PURPOSE

Events are a significant investment, both in time and money, with real business outcomes at stake. As an experiential designer, it's frustrating to see resources spent without clear purpose. Every event we attend offers reminders of the "dos" and "don'ts" of design, and SXSW was no exception.

One of my favorite examples from the past week was visiting Dubai's "Museum of the Future" activation. Entering the experience, you're immersed in a 360-degree environment, surrounded by vivid, abstract visuals in motion. To be

honest, my initial reaction was "this is cool, but what's the point?" However, after exploring more, the purpose became clear: to inspire imagination and provoke thoughts of the future. I learned that the animations were created by combining millions of satellite images and meteorological data, using generative AI models to provide the immersive experience. It was meant to make you wonder what the future of the world (and design) might look like when blending the beauty of Earth with the future possibilities of AI and machine learning.

This thought-provoking experience led me to this takeaway, which is something we tell ourselves every day at The Expo Group: memorable experiences require purpose. It's not all about flashy tech or an expensive "wow factor" – but rather, it's about creating change in one's emotions, thoughts, or actions. This experience was a great reminder that you can use AI or technology as a tool, but it must have a clear purpose.



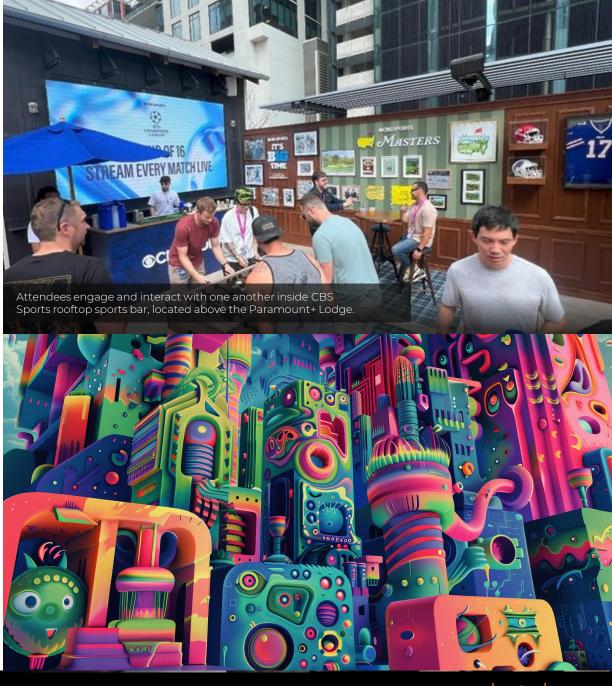
AI IS HERE TO STAY, BUT IT CANNOT REPLACE HUMAN INTERACTION

Piggybacking on "The Museum of the Future," it felt natural to discuss how Al is impacting the conference and events space. Its presence is increasing all around us every day.

However, in the event world, human interaction remains irreplaceable. At SXSW, I saw the growing importance of tactile experiences and why technology alone cannot replace them.

The events that leave a lasting impact engage our senses – what we feel, touch, hear, and see. While AI can enhance experiences, it's human interaction that truly makes an event memorable. I was reminded of this when I entered one of my favorite spaces of the week – "The Lodge" by Paramount+, which was bustling wall-to-wall with human-to-human engagement and tactile experiences. Whether it was the numerous interactive photo activations, or something as simple as a foosball table in a rooftop sports bar that brought strangers together for a friendly competition.

At The Expo Group, we deploy our own Al through our proprietary
CROWDPulse tool, which helps us understand our partners' audiences better by analyzing millions of pieces of data to identify trends inside their communities. While this technology alone is impressive, the real magic happens when we pair this data with purposeful human interaction and intentional engagement.







sxsw offered a perfect example of how an authentic experience can turn attendees into passionate brand advocates after just one visit. When people feel like they belong to a community, they don't just attend – they become invested in the brand and its mission.

This sense of connection is what drives us to share our experience and advocate for it long after the event is over.

SXSW masterfully created a sense of community, which made attendees like myself feel like we were part of something bigger. The entire event turned attendees and visitors into brand advocates who were eager to share their insights and experiences with others... I even wrote this article and purchased a SXSW t-shirt to prove it!

THANK YOU AUSTIN TEXAS!

Austin, Texas is an incredible city! As a first-timer at SXSW, I took the opportunity (and my very limited free time) to explore the city more while indulging in some of its local delicacies: insane good BBQ brisket (shoutout Franklin BBQ), amazing live music (shoutout Stubb's), and last but not least, its warm and welcoming locals.

This lively, yet relaxing city is truly a gem, and SXSW would not be the same without you, Austin!

