

FROM LIQUID TO LIFESTYLE

REWRITING THE
RULES OF CONNECTION
AND TURNING CUSTOMERS
INTO LIFELONG FANS



SOLOMON GROUP

FINN
PARTNERS

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Bartenders have long been the trusted storytellers of the spirits industry — shaping the way their guests understand not only what is in their glass, but the people, brands, and heritage that have informed it.

As the spirits industry evolves, and consumer behaviors change, the industry's most imaginative leaders aren't just creating great drinks — they're creating great spaces for guests to connect and experience hospitality. From across the bar counter at Bar Leone in Hong Kong (*Spirited Awards* Best International Cocktail Bar for 2025), an Italian-style neighborhood cocktail bar, to boutique hotels hosting travelers for business and leisure, and even from spirits brand homes to cultural landmarks, experiences are becoming an increasingly meaningful form of storytelling.

Bartenders remain at the heart of this movement. They don't just serve: they host, interpret, and guide. Recently, at *Tales of the Cocktail* in New Orleans, an annual gathering for hospitality professionals and cocktail enthusiasts — *Forbes* shared highlights from a recent survey of high net worth individuals that indicated that 83% of those individuals seek a bartender's opinion on recommendations when choosing what to drink. Bartenders' ability to shape what happens in the glass — and in the room — is what gives hospitality its lasting power, and consumers take notice.

But consumers want new and evolving experiences too, and they are more informed and more selective than ever — not only about what they drink (including growing categories like CBD/THC and Non-Alc) but also the environments and experiences they are seeking. Spirits brands have more opportunity than

ever to convey their stories directly and authentically to consumers. In a digital-first world, people are craving real connection that fosters community. They want to gather, to celebrate, to be transported — and the most successful brands are those who understand how to create environments that feel personal, not promotional.

This is growing territory and it is very exciting — it's a call to action to think outside of the box and to create collaborations, rituals, and stories that foster environments for multisensory exploration and truly memorable experiences. Whether that is through the lens of exploring terroir or cultural tourism, or in replicating a brand's story so consumers can be met wherever they are, there is a growing desire to meld cocktail culture and elevated hospitality into a lifestyle.

This report explores that evolving frontier. It looks at the new ecosystems being built around spirits — spaces that blur the lines between education, entertainment, and connection. From multisensory tasting rooms to bartender-led hotel experiences, these case studies highlight how some brands are deepening their impact not through reach alone, but through resonance.

At *Tales of the Cocktail*, we've always believed that storytelling is central to hospitality and have made it our mission to celebrate the people, places, and brands that make this industry so extraordinary. We hope this report reflects the spirit of collaboration, curiosity, and craft that defines our community.

Eileen Wayner
Tales of the Cocktail Foundation CEO

FOREWORD



The spirits industry is at a crossroads. Competition from wellness products and non-alcoholic alternatives has ramped up, forcing traditional brands to reassess their market landscape. Changes in alcohol consumption patterns have intensified this market pressure and created demands for bold thinking and reinvention.

At the same time, there's a growing need for authentic connection in our hyper-digital world. Consumers crave experiences that feel real and meaningful. They want to belong to communities and share stories that reflect their values and aspirations.

With change comes opportunity. The most successful brands are discovering that diversification can unlock new revenue streams and deepen consumer relationships in ways that pure product focus never could.

The central shift is that it's no longer simply about liquid, it's about lifestyle. Forward-thinking industry leaders are viewing this as an opportunity to pivot to experience-focused business models. The experiential and immersive space offers unique opportunities to provide authentic connections while building genuine fandom.

Brands that master this transition don't just survive market volatility. They hedge their positions by becoming integral to their customers' lives, creating emotional bonds that rise above economic cycles and competitive pressures. This evolution represents more than adaptation to threats: it's strategic positioning for long-term growth.

SETTING THE STAGE

CHALLENGES AS POSSIBILITIES



AUTHENTICITY

STORY

FANDOM

THE SCIENCE OF BRAND SUCCESS



Why brands that ‘walk their talk’ are winning hearts, minds, and wallets — and unwavering customer loyalty

THE TRUST DEFICIT

The numbers point out a big gap: **86% of consumers say authenticity drives their brand choices, but only 57% believe brands deliver on their promises.** This gap is more than a marketing challenge. It threatens survival in a marketplace where **68% of consumers** will pay more to shop with brands they’re loyal to, even amid economic uncertainty. Bridging this gap means embracing authenticity, because loyalty is earned by brands that consistently deliver on that promise.

Authenticity isn’t a tactic. It’s not even a mission. Authenticity is *how* you do everything: the unwavering commitment to doing what you say, and to who you truly are. Authenticity creates genuine connections through consistent actions that reflect true values, not just messaging. This shift from performative behavior to genuineness reshapes how brands build loyalty and survive in a world that’s increasingly transparent.

THE SCIENCE OF AUTHENTICITY

BUILDING BRAND LOYALTY IN AN ERA OF RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

"Our brains have evolved to see inconsistencies as a threat, making authenticity the fastest way to earn trust."

Phill Agnew, Host of Nudge, the UK's #1 Marketing Podcast

The Science Behind Authentic Loyalty

Recent research provides compelling evidence for authenticity's impact on loyalty. Studies show that authenticity positively affects brand passion, which in turn drives fandom. When authenticity creates trust, and trust creates engagement, the result is loyalty that goes beyond transactions.

69% of consumers will make purchasing decisions based on shared values with a brand. They're not just buying products, they're buying into beliefs. Yet in this era of radical transparency, where every action faces scrutiny (hello, American Eagle...) and inconsistencies are amplified in seconds (hello, Astronomer...), ordinary marketing falls short.

Research from Georgia State University shows that consumers who perceive a brand as authentic develop stronger emotional bonds to those brands than typical consumers. These emotional connections drive the kind of loyalty that survives economic downturns and competitive pressures.

The Behavioral Science

The authenticity advantage rests on solid psychological foundations. Humans evolved to be able to detect deception as a survival mechanism, making us very sensitive to inconsistencies between stated values and actual behavior. In our hyper-connected world, this detection system operates at scale and speed.

When brands achieve genuine authenticity, they unlock powerful business benefits.

Authentic brands command premium pricing because consumers view the extra cost as investment in shared values. They weather crises better because they've built trust reserves. They create organic advocacy — the kind of word-of-mouth that money can't buy.

Most importantly, authentic brands achieve what *Harvard Business Review* calls "emotional loyalty." This loyalty has grown 26% between 2021 and 2024, driven by consumers seeking genuine relationships with companies they trust.

The Long Game

Building authentic loyalty isn't a quarterly initiative, it's a long-term commitment requiring patience. Authenticity compounds over time, but it starts with a simple principle: be genuinely and consistently yourself.


The brands that will thrive aren't those with the biggest budgets or cleverest campaigns. They're the ones courageous enough to align their actions with their values, day after day, decision after decision.

When authenticity runs deep enough, loyalty becomes unshakeable.

The Bottom Line

In our trust-starved marketplace, authenticity isn't just good business, it's the only business. Movements rise above commerce. Brands will discover that when authenticity runs deep enough, loyalty becomes unshakeable, and customers become champions.





When Netflix launched *Drive to Survive* in 2019, Formula 1 was already a global spectacle. But in America, it was niche entertainment, averaging just 554,000 viewers per race. Five years later, F1 races regularly get over a million U.S. viewers, with the 2024 Miami Grand Prix hitting a record 3.6 million. Netflix didn't just add cameras to cars; it transformed data points into human drama, turning casual observers into devoted fans. It's neuroscience at work.

Your Brain on Narrative

When we process facts and figures, only our language centers light up on brain scans. But stories activate something far more powerful: a broad neural network spanning memory, emotion, sensory processing, and

motor cortex. Hearing about someone gripping a steering wheel doesn't just register as information, it literally fires the same neurons we'd use to grip something ourselves.

This neural mirroring explains why stories are sticky. Stanford University's Jennifer Aaker found that information delivered through story is remembered 22 times more effectively than facts alone. And the mechanism runs deeper than retention. Compelling narratives trigger oxytocin release, often called the "trust hormone." This biochemical shift doesn't just make us feel good. It makes us act. Research shows people are significantly more likely to donate money, follow health protocols, or change purchasing behavior when information arrives wrapped in a story.

THE SCIENCE OF STORY

WHY NARRATIVES CAN REWIRE BRAINS, CHANGE BEHAVIOR AND DRIVE BUSINESS RESULTS

“A compelling brand story creates emotional attachment — the foundation for commanding a premium price.”

Paul J. Zak, PhD, Founder, Immersion Neuroscience

Stories Sell

In a famous eBay experiment, the total value of ordinary thrift-store trinkets paired with short fictional stories **sold for almost 3,000% more than their original purchase price**, proving narrative can turn objects into meaning, and meaning into value. Just like those eBay listings, entertainment proves the power of narrative to drive real-world behavior. *The Queen's Gambit* didn't just entertain, it drove chess set **sales up 87%** and chess book purchases up 603%. *The White Lotus* Season 3 sparked an **88% surge** in Koh Samui tourism searches. *Welcome to Wrexham* generated **£179 million** in tourism value for the Welsh town.

In-person activations take these principles further, turning passive consumption into experiential theater. Nowhere is this theater more powerful than in food and beverage. **Research** shows that wine tastes better when paired with story, and the layering of multiple sensory cues amplifies the effect. When **Hidden Worlds** serves a dirty martini made with oyster brine and theatrical flourish, they create what psychologists call “embodied cognition,” stories you can taste, touch, and fully participate in. This evolution reflects a deeper truth: multisensory storytelling creates stronger neural pathways than single-channel narrative. Brand homes are perfectly positioned to provide — and control — these multisensory narratives.

The Structure of Meaning

In our splintered media landscape, stories help us organize chaos into meaning. A job change, new

technology or market disruption is overwhelming until it becomes part of a narrative with structure: a beginning, conflict, struggle, and finally, a resolution. This cognitive framework helps both tellers and listeners process complex information.

The business implications are profound. McKinsey research reveals that emotionally engaged customers are 3.5 times more likely to follow through on commitments. **Spirits brands using story-based communications see 40% higher recall rates among distributors and bartenders compared to traditional presentations.**

The Neural Economics

The most successful brands understand this reality: in a world drowning in data, the companies that win are those that turn information into stories, and stories into action. Apple's \$200 million *F1* movie sold more than tickets; it set the stage for a **\$150 million** annual streaming rights bid, nearly doubling the sport's media value.

This is the power of narrative economics. Tell the right story, and you don't just capture attention. You can create markets, shift behaviors, and change entire industries. The question isn't whether stories work. The question is whether you're telling the ones that matter.

Narrative-forward brands know that story creates impact. Whether it's **Uncle Nearest Whiskey** reclaiming lost history, **Mount Gay Rum** anchoring itself in centuries of heritage, **Hendrick's Gin** crafting a whimsical universe, or **Del Maguey Mezcal** bottling the soul of Oaxacan villages. What is your story?



THE SCIENCE OF FANDOM

THE ART OF BRAND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

The science behind superfans and why the spirits industry's future depends on community, not just customers.

The Fan Premium

The numbers tell a compelling story: fans are worth 1.7 times more than regular customers, and they drive 80% of all brand advocacy. In an industry facing headwinds, spirits brands are discovering that building fandom isn't just nice to have, it's essential for survival.

"Fandom isn't a marketing strategy," explains Gary Solomon Jr., co-founder and CEO of Solomon Group and chairman of Tales of the Cocktail. "Fandom is a relationship, and you build it by giving people something that they belong to, not just something that they buy."

This fundamental shift from transactional to transformational relationships is reshaping how spirits brands think about growth, loyalty and long-term value creation.

Fandom in Spirits: The Whiskey Revolution

Think fandom is just for sports? Think again. Whiskey is just one example of spirits-related fandom. From premium drops on secondary markets to one million subscribers on Reddit, whiskey has become a fandom epicenter that extends far beyond traditional consumption. Enthusiasts trade limited releases like "sneakerheads" do, study trademark applications to predict future offerings, and create elaborate tasting notes that rival wine critics.

This community-driven passion translates directly to business value. When fans are willing to pay premiums, wait in lines, and evangelize, they're demonstrating the kind of loyalty that transcends price sensitivity and economic downturns.

THREE PATHS TO SPIRITS FANDOM

The spirits industry offers fascinating examples of building superfan communities, each leveraging different aspects of human connection and storytelling.



1. The Personality-Driven Movement: Teremana's Million Case Success

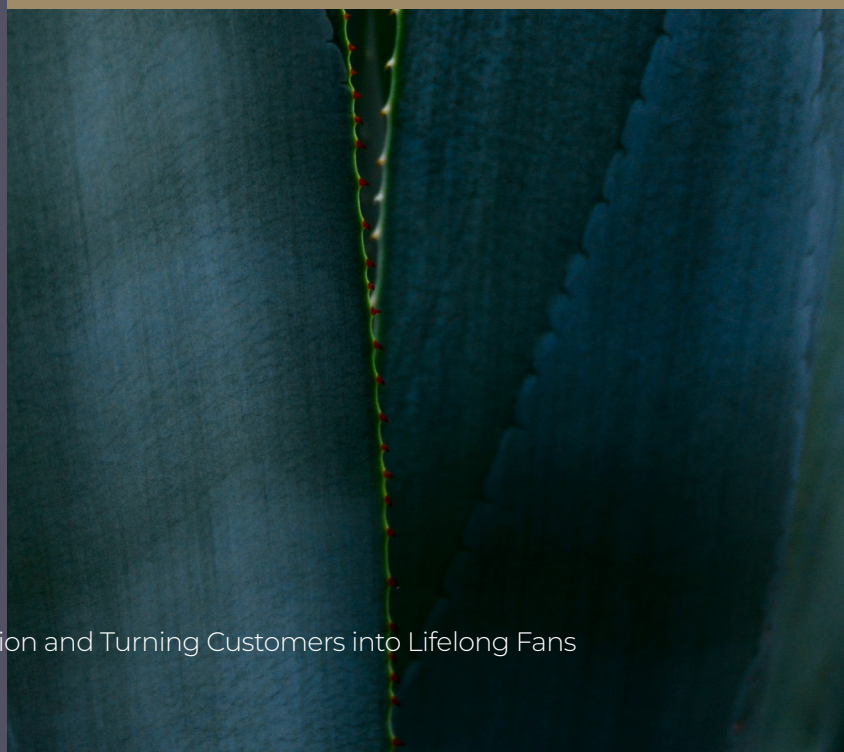
Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's Teremana Tequila didn't just launch a product, it launched a movement, selling over one million cases in 2023 alone and powered largely by social media. One of the most successful spirit launches ever, Teremana proved that authentic personality can create instant community.

2. The Heritage Deep-Dive: Sazerac's Living Documentary

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Sazerac House in New Orleans represents the heritage-driven approach to fandom. Visitors don't just taste whiskey, they step into a living brand experience that creates multi-sensory connections to history, culture, stories, traditions, and craftsmanship that can't be replicated by newer brands.

3. The Cultural Phenomenon: Gin's Aesthetic Revolution

Gin demonstrates how aesthetics and culture can drive fandom at scale. With over 14 million Instagram posts tagged with #gin, the spirit has captured the zeitgeist around cocktail culture and home mixology. This social media passion has real-world impact: the number of gin distilleries in the U.K. exploded from 150 to over 820 in just 10 years.



THE SCIENCE OF FANDOM

The gin renaissance shows how visual appeal, mixability, and lifestyle alignment can create communities that span from professional bartenders to home enthusiasts, all united by shared appreciation for craft and creativity.

Sport Provides a Blueprint

Research from [The Development of Sports Fan: From Self-Identification to "Diehard"](#) reveals insights about fandom development. Shared experiences like participating in fan rituals, tailgating, and viewing and attending games together intensify communal bonds and deepen fan loyalty.

Solomon draws the parallel: **"When you look into the journey of a sports fan, you start at home with your team scarf, then you go to your bar and have a drink with other people. Then you walk to the venue where everybody's chanting songs together. It doesn't matter if you are a delivery driver for Amazon or Jeff Bezos. You're all connected and part of this tribe."**

It's this tribal connection that explains why people spend thousands on Taylor Swift tickets when they could stream her music for \$9.99, or why whiskey enthusiasts travel across states for distillery visits when they could buy the same bottles locally.

Authenticity is Essential

Brand authenticity research by Christopher L. Campagna reveals that authenticity significantly enhances brand passion, which in turn drives fandom. When consumers perceive a brand as authentic, they develop stronger emotional attachments that transcend typical customer

relationships. This finding is critical for spirits brands because authenticity can't be manufactured overnight. It requires consistent storytelling, genuine values alignment, and experiences that feel real rather than like a marketing campaign.

"The key really is around belonging," Solomon emphasizes. "That's where these fan-driven brands play and win."

The Fandom Trifecta: Brand Immersion, Narrative, and Authenticity

The most successful spirits brands understand that fandom requires three essential elements working in harmony.

- **Brand Immersion:**

While brand immersion may occur both offline and online, in-person experiences are especially powerful. Brand homes and immersive destinations allow guests to be surrounded by the brand's narrative for extended periods. Unlike brief tastings or tours, these experiences create lasting memories and deeper connections.

- **Compelling Narratives:**

Strong storytelling and curatorial excellence enable brands to communicate their values, heritage, and vision in ways that resonate emotionally with visitors.

- **Genuine Authenticity:**

The combination of longer dwell times and exposure to compelling storytelling amplifies feelings of authenticity, the foundation of genuine fandom.

A \$2 Billion Proof Point

Napa Valley provides compelling evidence of fandom's economic power. The region sees 3.5 million

visitors annually, generating more than \$2 billion in tourism revenue. This massive economic impact proves that wine fandom is as much about the experience as the product — and spirits brands are taking notice.

Napa Valley demonstrates how geographical destinations can become pilgrimage sites for superfans, creating economic engines that extend far beyond bottle sales to encompass hospitality, retail, education, and entertainment.

The Digital-Physical Flywheel

Modern fandom doesn't require choosing between digital and in-real-life experiences. The most successful brands seamlessly loop between online and offline engagement.

"One should design an experience that starts online, peaks in real life and then echoes back digitally in the community," Solomon said. "And that flywheel can spin."

This integration means discovery happens on social media, deepens through in-person experiences, and amplifies back through digital sharing, creating compound growth in fan engagement and advocacy.

The Democracy of Belonging

Perhaps most importantly, effective fandom strategies democratize access to brand communities. Not everyone can afford premium bottles or exclusive events, but fandom allows participation at many levels.

"Fandom doesn't require physical presence. It requires emotional presence," Solomon notes. "The best brands make the experience feel available to everyone, anywhere."





Someone can be a devoted Jack Daniel's fan through alignment with the brand's spirit of independence and authentic heritage, cocktail experimentation, and social sharing, without ever visiting a distillery. The key is participation, not proximity.

The Water Revolution

Perhaps no brand better illustrates fandom's power than Liquid Death, a company that created superfans around canned water by building punk rock attitude into hydration.

"Fans are tattooing the logo on themselves. They're going up and asking for water at bars," Solomon marvels. "The story is the buzz."

Liquid Death proves that when *story* becomes the hero, even commodity products can inspire devotion. For spirits brands with rich heritage, the fandom potential is even greater.

The Future of Spirits Fandom

Looking ahead, Solomon predicts that the most successful spirits brands will go beyond their

traditional role. **"The future belongs to brands that become lifestyle platforms, seamlessly integrating product, venue, and community," he said. "They won't just sell bottles; they'll sell connections, content, and culture."**

Brand homes will evolve into destinations that become content factories, fueling ongoing digital engagement. We'll see touring exhibits, pop-up hotels, culinary partnerships, and immersive experiences, all designed to deepen relationships with fans and create new revenue streams.

Building Your Campfire

For spirits brands ready to embrace fandom, Solomon offers this foundational advice: **"If you want community, build a campfire and then invite people to bring their own stories to it."**

The brands that thrive will understand that fandom isn't about controlling narratives, it's about creating authentic spaces where connections flourish, where shared

values unite strangers, and where every interaction deepens belonging.

They'll invest in the fandom trifecta of in-person experiences, compelling narratives, and authenticity. They'll measure success through engagement depth rather than just transaction frequency. And they'll recognize that building fandom is building long-term brand equity.

The X Advantage

The math is simple: fans are worth more than regular customers and drive brand advocacy. That represents the difference between thriving and surviving. The spirits brands that understand this equation, that invest in community over customers, stories over specifications, and belonging over buying, won't just weather industry challenges. They'll discover that when fandom runs deep enough, loyalty becomes unshakeable.

Authenticity, narrative, and fandom drive successful brand homes and IRL activations. Next, we unpack a few best-in-class cases.

LVMH

SAZERAC

CAMPARI

DEATH & CO

MARGARITAVILLE

BRAND SPOTLIGHT

LVMH's Experiential Strategy

LVMH transforms traditional product marketing into immersive brand experiences across its luxury portfolio. Take the company's bold move into luxury hospitality. When LVMH dropped \$3.2 billion to acquire Belmond in 2019, it wasn't just buying hotels and trains. It was purchasing stages on which its brands could perform. The partnership with Accor to revitalize the legendary Orient Express isn't about transportation: it's about creating mobile theaters where Dom Pérignon can be the star of the show while gliding through alpine valleys.

While most luxury brands are content to sell beautiful objects, LVMH has revolutionized what it means to engage with luxury itself. The secret isn't just about owning iconic products. It's about creating worlds where those products live and breathe.

The strategy becomes clear when you step into Cravan Bar in Paris. This isn't your typical high-end spirits showcase. It's a five-floor cultural laboratory, where cocktails cost as much as \$65 and each drink tells a story that weaves together art, fashion, literature, or cinema. And it needs to: the story serves as both revenue generator and testing ground, where Dom Pérignon becomes the main character in the evening's narrative rather than just another premium pour.

LVMH

BRAND SPOTLIGHT

The Experience Advantage

Why LVMH's Strategy Works:

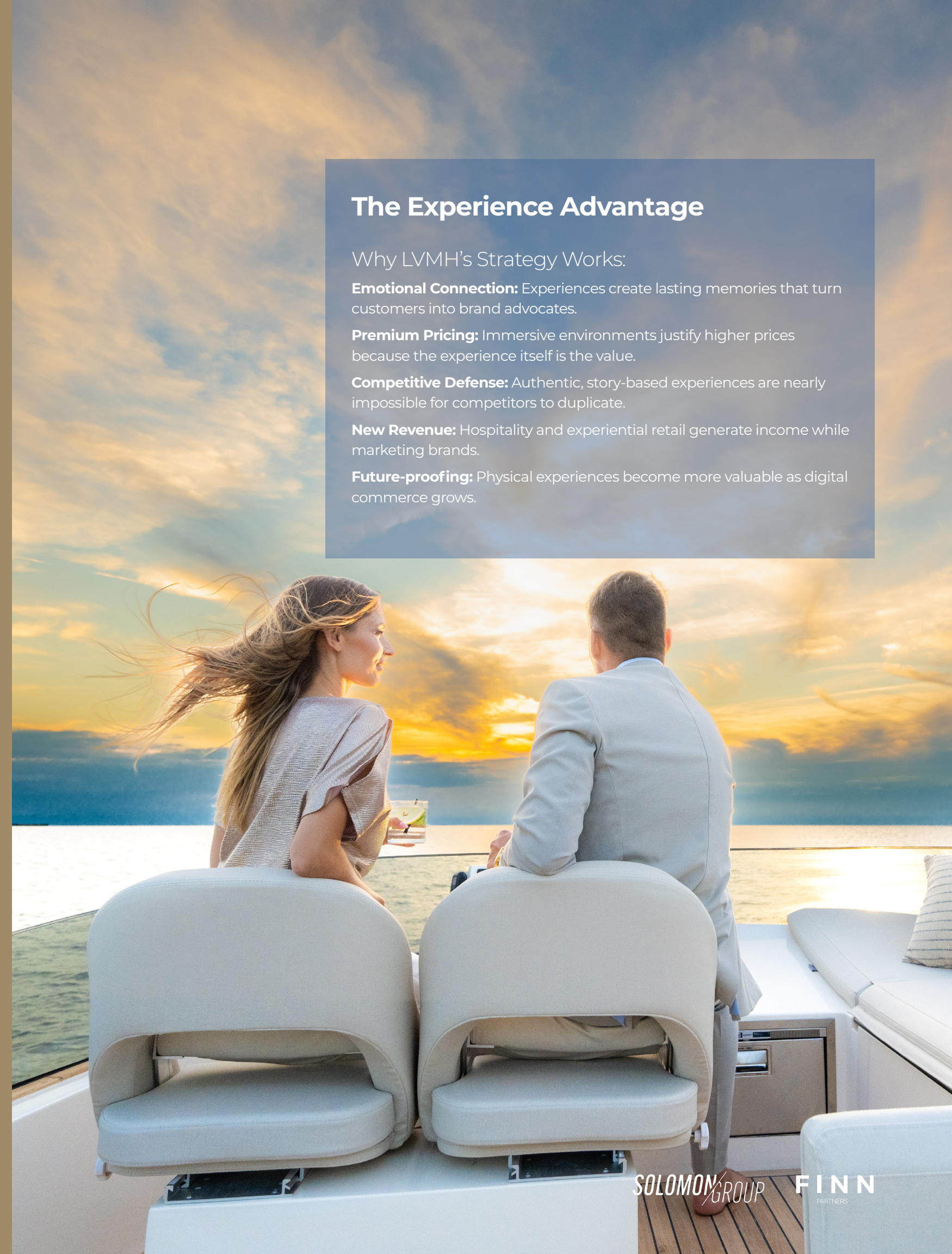
Emotional Connection: Experiences create lasting memories that turn customers into brand advocates.

Premium Pricing: Immersive environments justify higher prices because the experience itself is the value.

Competitive Defense: Authentic, story-based experiences are nearly impossible for competitors to duplicate.

New Revenue: Hospitality and experiential retail generate income while marketing brands.

Future-proofing: Physical experiences become more valuable as digital commerce grows.



Here's a Twist

An Idea for Forward-Thinking Brands Spirited Sailing

Embark on a voyage where every port tells a story through flavor. This culinary cocktail cruise pairs world-class mixology with authentic local dishes, celebrating each destination's unique palate. Sip, savor, and sail as chefs and bartenders craft immersive taste experiences inspired by the cultures and coastlines you explore.

Stories Worth Paying For

What makes this approach so savvy is how LVMH weaves together the breadth of its portfolio. A guest aboard the upcoming [Orient Express](#) ship in 2026 might start the evening with Moët & Chandon, dine alongside Hennessy pairings, and end the evening discussing the craft that goes into the spirits — as well as the journey. It's *luxury ecosystem* thinking, where every touchpoint is designed to reinforce the others.

The company has mastered the art of heritage storytelling integration, turning centuries-old Champagne caves and cognac cellars into immersive experiences that justify premium pricing. Not through marketing-speak, but through genuine encounters with story and skill.

[Ardbeg House](#), for example, represents the distillery's boldest move yet into experiential spirits luxury. The former Islay Hotel in Port Ellen, Scotland, purchased by LVMH in 2022, underwent a multi-million-dollar transformation to become something entirely new: a 12-room immersive experience. This isn't just accommodation; it's whisky theater. Each room and suite tells a different story about Ardbeg and Islay's rich history, while The Islay Bar features a whisky trolley stocked with limited and rare expressions that exist nowhere else. Guests don't just stay the night, they live inside the Ardbeg story, bringing the historic Islay distillery into one of the world's most sophisticated luxury properties. This is strategic alignment. LVMH understands that true luxury isn't about price tags; it's about creating experiences that money can't easily replicate.

Strategic Importance

Leading luxury brands are moving from product to experience as consumer expectations evolve beyond mere ownership. LVMH's experiential pivot addresses a fundamental shift in how luxury consumers, particularly younger ones, define value. When you can buy almost anything online, or you have the means to buy pretty much anything at all, the brands that will win hearts and minds are those that offer something irreplaceable: memorable experiences rooted in authentic stories.

This emotional connection strategy pays dividends in ways traditional advertising cannot. When someone has sipped Champagne while watching the Italian countryside roll by from The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, or slept in The Rebel Suite, an Ardbeg House guest room inspired by the great sea rebellions of Islay, the person isn't just going to remember a product. The customer will recall *a moment*, one that becomes part of a personal story. That kind of emotional stamp creates brand loyalty that survives economic downturns and competitive pressures.

Perhaps more importantly, experiences provide unassailable justification for premium pricing. A fifty-dollar cocktail at Cravan isn't expensive when it comes with access to an exclusive cultural environment, expert mixology, and the kind of ambience that makes you feel like you're part of something special.

The experience itself becomes the value proposition, and from a competitive standpoint, LVMH has created something nearly impossible to replicate. While competitors can try to copy product formulations or even design aesthetics, they cannot duplicate The Orient Express' century-old romance or the allure of Champagne's chalk tunnels. These experiential assets become competitive moats that deepen over time.

And the strategy opens entirely new revenue streams. Hotels, restaurants, trains, and experiential retail don't just market existing products; they generate substantial income while reinforcing the brand's ethos. It's marketing that pays for itself while building genuine brand equity.

The Long Game

As digital commerce continues to commoditize luxury goods, IRL experiences become increasingly precious. LVMH's investment in hospitality and experiential retail perfectly positions the company for an economy where memory-making matters more than object-owning. It has transformed from a luxury *goods* company into a luxury *experience* company. That distinction will define the next decade of premium brand success.

From Liquid to Lifestyle: How Sazerac Turned Tourism into Brand Magic

While many spirits brands are still searching for ways to truly engage consumers, Sazerac has figured it out. The strategy is simple but powerful: shift the focus from the product itself to the story behind it and deliver that story in a destination where people genuinely want to spend time.

Reinventing the Brand Home

At 19,800 square feet in the heart of New Orleans, the Sazerac House is more than a distillery tour. It's a love letter to cocktail culture that's part museum, part distillery, part elevated immersive experience.

And like an outstanding cocktail, it blends tradition with innovation.

Guests step into a meticulous recreation of Peychaud's apothecary, the air scented with gentian root, as they watch bitters hand-bottled for New Orleans' official cocktail. It's small-batch craft, grounded in two centuries of cocktail history.

At interactive bartending stations, visitors choose an ambiance, from a classic New

Orleans dining room or neighborhood bar to a contemporary lounge. Select a cocktail, and a digital mixologist demonstrates the build and technique while narrating the cultural context that shaped it.

Heritage Matters

Sazerac's approach goes beyond showcasing its portfolio. What visitors encounter is a celebration of New Orleans itself, the birthplace of the Sazerac cocktail. This positioning makes the Sazerac House feel less like a corporate showroom and more like a cultural landmark.

Visitors don't leave with just bottles, they leave with stories, memories, and the confidence to share a piece of cocktail culture.

As Ed Bell, the brand's Home Place Director, explains, "We want guests to leave with a toolkit they can use to share the story of Sazerac with others."

In practice, that means empowering visitors not just to enjoy the experience onsite, but to carry it forward, whether by mixing a proper Sazerac at a dinner party or retelling the history that gives the cocktail its enduring place in American culture.

SAZERAC

BRAND SPOTLIGHT



“We want people to fall in love with our brands authentically — through storytelling and meaningful emotional connections.”

Ed Bell, Homeplace Director, Sazerac

The Power of Free

Admission to the Sazerac House is free, but the value lies far beyond the ticket price. The approach is designed to meet every consumer where they are and to open the door to long-term brand engagement.

By removing the barrier of admission, the Sazerac House invites as many people as possible to step inside, immerse themselves in the story of the brands, and connect in ways that feel both authentic and memorable. Along the way, guests may opt into choiceful paid experiences that deepen their engagement before the journey culminates in a retail space featuring thoughtfully curated offerings: Spirits in travel-ready formats, cocktail kits, and tools that make the home bar inspiring yet approachable.

In practice, strong experiences ensure that everything else follows. Guests choose to return, share their enthusiasm, and engage in ways that sustain both the brand and the business. Free entry becomes not a cost to carry, but a powerful starting point for relationships that last.

Beyond Traditional Advertising

Brand homes offer an advantage in markets where conventional alcohol advertising is restricted. In cities like Paris, where liquor promotion is prohibited, pop-ups and immersive activations provide a way to connect with consumers where traditional media cannot.

Even when these experiences operate at break-even or modest losses, the return on investment can surpass that of billboards or paid media. The key measure is not profit per visitor but, as Ed states, “the value in creating long-term brand fans,” a metric that increasingly favors experiential platforms, whether in permanent spaces or temporary activations.

The results speak clearly: the Sazerac House holds a 4.9-star rating and ranks #6 out of 632 attractions in New Orleans. Visitors aren't simply passing through; they are engaging deeply and leaving as advocates for the brand.

London: Testing the Paid Model

While the Sazerac House welcomes guests free of charge, Sazerac is experimenting with a different approach at the Buffalo Trace Tasting Rooms in London's Covent Garden. This location charges admission, creating a strategic test to understand how pricing shapes both perception and engagement.

As Ed explains, “The interesting dynamic with London is, by being free, people can feel less likely to value the experience as a good use of their time. Time is their most important asset, and if it's free they may assume it will be underwhelming. But in practice, the response in London has been outstanding, with our highest visitor feedback to date.”

The paid model also brings practical benefits. In competitive markets like London, ticketed attractions gain greater visibility on booking and travel platforms, which prioritize experiences that generate commissions. By running both free and paid models, Sazerac is building valuable data on how pricing influences exposure, brand positioning, and long-term expansion strategy.

Innovating in the Brand Home Space

By transforming a distillery tour into a cultural destination, Sazerac has redefined what brand homes can achieve. The Sazerac House is not just about spirits, but about storytelling, place-making, and creating advocates who carry the brand forward. Crucially, it demonstrates that brand homes can succeed where traditional advertising falls short, overcoming regulatory barriers, generating stronger ROI than conventional media, and flexing pricing models to fit local markets. By turning heritage into an immersive, globally adaptable experience, Sazerac has built a platform that strengthens equity, drives revenue, and embeds the brand into cultural fabric.



Here's a Twist

An Idea for Forward-Thinking Brands The Mixology Hall of Fame

Step into the Mixology Hall of Fame, where legendary bartenders, iconic cocktails, and rare spirits are immortalized. Wander through immersive exhibits, from Prohibition-era speakeasies to modern molecular marvels, and uncover untold tales of innovation, rivalry, and revelry that shaped the art, culture, and craft of the perfect pour.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Sazerac has embraced a principle long mastered by others, like Coca-Cola and Harley-Davidson: people don't just buy products, they buy feelings. And feelings are far easier to shape when the brand controls the entire environment.

The success of the Sazerac House is no accident. Its leadership team draws on deep experience in visitor attractions and hospitality, ensuring that every detail contributes to a seamless, emotionally resonant experience. Seasonal cocktails that evolve with Mardi Gras and the holidays, hands-on activations that make visitors feel like insiders, and storytelling that links a 200-year-old recipe to the city around it all work together to create moments that linger long after the visit.

Staying Focused Amid a Broad Portfolio

Many companies struggle to highlight multiple brands without eroding clarity. Sazerac has turned that challenge into an advantage by making diversity itself the point. From heritage labels like Sazerac Rye to trend-driven products such as BuzzBalls (the buzzy spheres taking over convenience stores,) each offering is positioned as part of a single, unifying narrative: the evolving story of New Orleans cocktail culture. This cohesion allows very different products to coexist seamlessly within the same experience.

The Long Game

"We know that we're creating brand fans for life," said Ed Bell, and the data supports it. Net Promoter Scores continue to climb, signaling stronger advocacy with each visit. More importantly, Sazerac has turned what was once a marketing

expense into a revenue-generating platform that builds equity over the long term. In an industry often challenged to connect with younger consumers, that shift is a powerful competitive advantage.

Free Entry, Priceless Impact

Why offer for free what others might charge for? Because Sazerac's goal is connection, not transactions. By removing the price barrier, the Sazerac House invites visitors to engage on their own terms, creating the feeling of being welcomed as a guest rather than processed as a customer. That sense of hospitality deepens emotional attachment, and guests who feel like insiders are far more likely to become long-term brand advocates.

From Bitter to Better: Campari's Cultural Integration Strategy

Campari Group transforms traditional spirits marketing into immersive cultural experiences that connect brands to place, art, and lifestyle.

While many spirits companies angle for bar placements and influencer partnerships, Campari has reimagined what it means to sell more than just liquid. Using its Italian heritage as both content and competitive advantage, Campari has become a cultural experience curator. The secret isn't just about creating great products, it's about embedding them so deeply into culture that they become inseparable from the experiences people crave.

Take **Galleria Campari** in Milan, where the company turned its original 1904 production facility into something entirely new: a cultural archive housed in an interactive museum designed by renowned architect **Mario Botta**. The museum opened in 2010 for Campari's 150th anniversary and houses more than 3,000 works, including original Belle Époque posters and advertising graphics by major artists such as Marcello Dudovich, Leonetto Cappiello, and Fortunato Depero.

Or witness the Aperol takeover of Coachella. This wasn't your typical festival sponsorship. Campari created the *Aperol Terrazza* featuring an authentic golden hour experience crafted in collaboration with Chef Samuele Silvestri, Executive Chef of the Terrazza Aperol in Venice. The activation transported guests to Venice, where Aperol and *cicchetti* culture thrives. A bright orange *piazza* created unique photo moments including an interior tram and a pergola rooftop from which bubbles floated during golden hour each day. The Instagram-worthy moments fueled user-generated content that extended brand reach organically. It's cultural tourism and theater compressed into festival format.

CAMPARI

BRAND SPOTLIGHT



Stories Worth Sipping

What makes this approach superb is how Campari leans on its Italian heritage while adapting it for local markets. The company doesn't just sell Aperol Spritzes. It sells the Italian concept of *aperitivo* culture, complete with golden hour timing and social rituals that justify premium pricing. The experience itself adds value.

And the integration goes deeper. Galleria Campari features a 105-ft video wall dedicated to commercials from the '50s to the '70s, made by famous directors who collaborated with the brand. When Federico Fellini directs your commercials, you're not just advertising products. You're creating cinema that just happens to feature your brand.

This cultural embedding strategy extends across the portfolio due to Campari's understanding that modern consumers buy stories first. Each brand becomes a gateway to exploring distinct cultures, whether that's Wild Turkey's Kentucky bourbon heritage or Grand Marnier's French luxury tradition. It has mastered the art of making marketing feel like cultural education, turning brand homes into destinations that attract tourists independent of purchase intent. Visitors to Galleria Campari can immerse themselves in the brand's historical archive, tracing the history of the famous aperitif that is also a piece of Italian history.

Why It Works

Strategic Tourism Marketing

Milan welcomed a record-breaking 8.5 million tourists in 2023, marking a 34% increase from 2022 and surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 14%.

Campari Group's cultural strategy addresses an important shift in how consumers define value. When premium spirits face pressure from health trends and economic uncertainty, brands that offer educational and cultural experiences create indisputable differentiation. You can buy amaro anywhere. You can only experience the intersection of Italian cinema history and aperitivo culture at Galleria Campari.



The Cultural Experience Advantage

Tourism Integration: Brand homes tap into Milan's 8.5 million annual tourists and broader cultural tourism trends.

Authentic Storytelling: 150 years of Italian heritage provide cultural connections that justify premium pricing.

Multi-revenue Streams: Museums, events, and experiences generate income while marketing brands.

Government Partnerships: Cultural preservation creates positive relationships with regional authorities.

Organic Amplification: Instagram-worthy experiences cause user-generated content that extends reach naturally.



Here's a Twist

An Idea for Forward-Thinking Brands The Moutai Art Gallery

An immersive fusion of fine spirit and fine art? Absolutely. Picture a traveling exhibition of Chinese masterpieces, presented by Moutai, which pairs each work with the heritage of China's most iconic liquor, turning the gallery into a destination where history, flavor, and visual beauty converge in a cultural journey.

The revenue opportunities extend far beyond bottle sales. Cultural tourism integration creates multiple income streams while building brand equity. Tourism spending contributes 17% to the total spending in Milan, with high-spending visitors averaging more than \$180 per day on accommodations and \$250 on restaurants, shopping, museums, and local transport in summer 2024. When your brand becomes part of the tourist experience, you tap into that spending power.

Government partnership opportunities emerge naturally from this approach. Cultural institutions want to support brands that preserve and promote local heritage rather than simply extracting profits. Galleria Campari doesn't just market Campari products. It preserves Italian advertising history and employs local guides, creating a positive economic impact that generates goodwill with regional authorities.

Extended Engagement Economics

The cultural approach also creates defensive barriers. Other spirits companies cannot simply re-engineer authentic relationships built on heritage. Campari Group's archive of 3,000 artistic works and century-long collaboration with renowned filmmakers represents unmatched brand equity that becomes more valuable as cultural tourism grows.

The strategy also provides insulation against economic cycles. Despite challenges, Campari Group reported about \$3.5 billion in sales for 2024, up 2.4% organically, with the House of Aperitifs segment growing 6% despite a challenging peak season. Cultural experiences create emotional loyalty that survives price sensitivity better than traditional marketing approaches.

The Authenticity Advantage

Most critically, this strategy works for consumers who increasingly seek cultural education alongside their consumption choices. When someone orders an Aperol Spritz, they're not just buying a cocktail, they're participating in an Italian social ritual that comes with its own timing, setting, and etiquette. The company has transformed from a spirits manufacturer into a cultural experience curator, and that distinction will define the next decade of premium beverage success.

"People don't just travel to see a place, they travel to belong to it. We create spaces where locals and travelers share the same barstool, sparking the kind of connection that turns a trip into a memory."

David Kaplan, Co-Founder, Death & Co

Death & Co Extends Cocktail Culture Into Hospitality Sector

Hotel Integration Opens Growth Pathway for Iconic Bar Brand

Death & Co has mastered the art of transforming moments into memories through meticulously crafted cocktails and the environments that surround them. Now, the pioneering bar brand is writing its next chapter by extending that same philosophy into full hospitality experiences through strategic hotel integration, a move that positions the company at the forefront of a rapidly expanding market opportunity.

The transition from standalone bar operator to integrated hospitality brand represents more than expansion; it demonstrates how established food and beverage concepts can lean into their cultural cachet to capture greater market share. With the [global hospitality market](#) projected to boast an annual growth rate of more than 10%, Death & Co's timing reflects strategic foresight rather than mere opportunistic growth.

DEATH & CO

BRAND SPOTLIGHT



SOLOMON GROUP

FINN PARTNERS

From Bar to Lifestyle Ecosystem

The brand's evolution began organically six years ago when Death & Co opened its second bar location within The Ramble Hotel in Denver. This partnership revealed something powerful: there's a lot of common ground between cocktail culture and elevated hospitality.

The cocktail-anchored experience at The Ramble, where the lobby is interchangeable with the bar, resulted in many accolades and awards, including [Esquire's Best Bars in America in 2019, North America's 50 Best Bars in 2022, and named among Travel + Leisure's World's Best Hotel awards.](#)

The success of this integration provided the blueprint for Midnight Auteur Hotels, a new hospitality company launched by Death & Co founders Alex Day, Ryan Diggins, and David Kaplan. The group realized that community driven food and beverage offerings – in their case, cocktail anchored hospitality, positively affected room rates and occupancy.

Municipal Grand exemplifies the concept's potential. The 44-room boutique property is a historic 1960s era banking building converted into a community gathering space anchored by a variety of lively food and beverage concepts throughout the hotel, centered around its namesake lobby bar — the heartbeat of the property — and offers all-day gathering places for hotel guests, locals, and tourists alike.

The parallel motivation was to create a more connected guest experience where the entire property operates under unified vision rather than the typical push and pull between hotel management and F&B operations. This integrated approach allows each space add to a cohesive journey where the morning coffee ritual flows naturally

into afternoon lobby socializing and evening cocktail culture, all under one carefully orchestrated brand experience.

This level of orchestration creates a curated lifestyle experience, further amplified by the lobby as a local destination of choice. The building has an energy, an 'in the know' approval and gives hotel guests a sense of VIP status at a highly desirable location that justifies premium pricing.

Positioning for Travel Sector Opportunities

Death & Co's hotel strategy benefits from several converging market trends that create significant growth opportunities. The boutique hotel market in the U.S. has grown faster than the overall industry in recent years, reflecting consumer willingness to pay premiums for distinctive stays. Travelers who like to be surprised or prefer a local experience tend to gravitate toward boutique hotels, where the stay is as important as the trip itself. This kind of travel aligns perfectly with Death & Co's brand identity: a neo-speakeasy aesthetic built around discovery and craftsmanship, and a commitment to local community engagement.

The timing advantages extend beyond consumer preferences: *bleisure* travel, defined as business trips that are extended for leisure purposes, is a hot market. Death & Co's hotel concepts are ideally positioned to serve this growing segment through workspace-friendly lobby bars and extended-stay-friendly programming.

Building for Future Scale

Their current strategy is to control the brand through owned properties where they can direct all elements of the design and experience, and prove replicability and scalability. The Midnight Auteur model

Here's a Twist

An Idea for Forward-Thinking Brands The Aperol Hotel

Check into la dolce vita at the Aperol Hotel, where every detail channels the easy glamour of Italian living. From sunlit terrazze and citrus-scented courtyards to late-afternoon spritz rituals and live music under the stars, it's a celebration of style, leisure, and the art of doing nothing beautifully.

suggests clear potential for future scalability through possible franchising and brand licensing opportunities. Should Midnight Auteur pursue franchising in the future, its approach would offer potential partners differentiation through proven beverage expertise and mixology programming.

When the idea for The Ramble Hotel was born, bringing Death & Co into the project was the connective tissue that rounded out the vision, demonstrating how the brand serves as a differentiating anchor for hotel development. The model's future scalability would be enhanced by Death & Co's existing operations infrastructure. The company already manages multiple locations across major markets, with established supply chains, training programs, and brand standards that could be adapted to hotel environments. This foundation would reduce the typical risks associated with franchise expansion.

Photo Credit: Death & Co



Results and Strategic Positioning

Early indicators suggest strong market validation for the hotel integration strategy. Since opening, The Ramble Hotel has become a Denver staple and filled a gap for quality lifestyle hospitality in the growing River North neighborhood. The property's success in establishing itself as a community anchor demonstrates the model's potential for creating long-term competitive advantages.

Having a lobby bar that's attuned to what the community wants, filled with energy and people, is the value proposition of Midnight Auteur. This focus on localization creates natural marketing advantages and reduces customer acquisition costs compared to traditional hotel models that depend heavily on transient travel.

The strategic positioning extends beyond immediate revenue benefits. By establishing hotel partnerships, Death & Co furthers its existing platforms — retail and educational programming via their [marketplace](#) — and beyond. The hotel model provides stable revenue bases that can support more experimental cocktail programming and seasonal menu development. The move into hotels also allows Death & Co to capture value within the real estate itself, and the eventual sale of the building.

Forward-Looking Growth

Death & Co's strategy represents a sophisticated evolution from celebrated, single-location bar operator to diversified hospitality brand. The approach builds on the company's cocktail expertise to capture more of each customer's travel spending and hedge against market headwinds, while positioning it for growth. This evolution transforms Death & Co from a bar company that happens to run hotels into a hospitality brand that's defined by world-class cocktails.

The founders envision hotels that seamlessly blend vibrant social spaces with comfortable havens, creating stays that feel worth premium pricing and that build loyalty which extends far beyond a single cocktail. The model works across different markets, and with franchise opportunities growing, Death & Co can expand its influence while preserving the craftsmanship and authenticity that built its reputation.

As travelers increasingly choose distinctive properties over cookie-cutter hotels, Death & Co's move into hospitality creates competitive advantages that traditional hotel operators can't easily copy.

By the Numbers:

Bleisure travel, defined as business trips that are then extended for leisure purposes, is a hot and growing market, valued at \$315.3 billion in 2022 and forecasted to grow to **\$731.4 billion by 2032**.

The global hospitality market is projected to reach **\$1,063 billion by 2028**, reflecting an annual growth rate of more than 10%.

The boutique hotel market in the U.S. has grown faster than the overall industry in recent years, outpacing others in **ADR and RevPAR growth**.

The hotel franchise market surpassed **\$36.7 billion** in 2023 driven by the rise in demand for unique and localized concepts.

“If cocktail and culinary culture is driving where people choose to travel, it makes sense to let F&B lead the story, starting from the very first touchpoint.”

David Kaplan, Co-Founder, Death & Co

Could Cocktail-Focused Hotels Succeed as Franchises?

While major hotel chains pursue growth through traditional franchise models, concepts like Death & Co's Midnight Auteur raise an intriguing question: could specialized, cocktail-focused hotels succeed as franchises by competing on differentiation rather than standardization?

Exploring the Franchise Potential of Experience-driven Hospitality

The Death & Co hotel model offers a compelling case study for this approach. Rather than relying on standardized amenities, their concept centers around curated beverage experiences and local community integration, elements that could translate effectively to a franchise system.

Potential Advantages:

Brand Licensing Efficiency: Unlike traditional hotel brands that require extensive property management training, a cocktail-anchored concept offers pre-built programming around beverage service, cultural events, and community engagement.

Multi-location Potential: In 2010, approximately 70% of hotels were franchises, but by 2019 that figure had increased to around 80%. The franchise model's continued growth creates opportunity for specialized concepts to capture market share.

Operational Differentiation: While traditional franchises compete on amenities and location, a cocktail-culture franchise would compete on experience curation, a more defensible market position.

Market Timing: These smaller-capacity properties — with typically 100 rooms or less — often feature distinctive or trendy designs and greater ambience than well-known franchises, positioning specialized concepts for success in the growing boutique segment.

Consumer Demand: A growing appetite for premium travel experiences has propelled major players in the industry, such as Marriott, Hilton, and Accor Hotels, to intensify their focus on luxury hotel franchises.

The Death & Co approach demonstrates how established food and beverage brands could leverage their cultural authority to create new categories that capture premium pricing while offering partners proven differentiation strategies in increasingly competitive hospitality markets.

Margaritaville: How a Song Inspired a Lifestyle Brand Empire

When Jimmy Buffett wrote “Margaritaville” in 1977, he never imagined that his four-minute anthem to relaxation would spawn a multi-billion-dollar global lifestyle empire. Yet nearly five decades later, what began as a song has evolved into one of the most comprehensive brand ecosystems in hospitality, welcoming over 20 million travelers annually to an array of resorts, vacation clubs, restaurants, cruise ships, and even active adult communities.

This evolution offers strategic lessons that go well beyond the hospitality sector. Few brands have achieved lifestyle diversification as comprehensively or authentically as Margaritaville. But the most fascinating thing about Margaritaville is that it has little to do with frozen concoctions and everything to do with understanding the economics of escapism.

MARGARITAVILLE

BRAND SPOTLIGHT



Beyond Product, Into Mindset

Margaritaville realized the most valuable aspect of thinking about a vacation destination was a 'universal desire for escape and the pursuit of joy.' "Everything we do is about emotion," explains John Cohlan, CEO & Co-Founder of Margaritaville. "One of the advantages we have is that Margaritaville is well known. The song was written in 1977, and it elicits an emotion. You're introducing that feeling and experience to them in different forms, and it starts with people walking into something that's organic and authentic."

That cultural authenticity became the foundation for expansion into categories that seem unrelated but serve the same emotional need. The current portfolio spans every major stage of life and lifestyle preference: luxury condominiums for the aspirational, 55-and-better communities for active retirees, all-inclusive destinations, getaways for families, cruise experiences for adventurers, and outdoor resorts for road-trippers.

The wisdom is in recognizing that lifestyle brands must offer multiple touchpoints with the same core promise. Rather than limiting expansion to adjacent categories, Margaritaville created what amounts to a holistic ecosystem where consumers can immerse themselves within the brand regardless of their age, stage, or current latitude.

The Community Strategy

The brand's most telling [success story](#) happened in Daytona, Florida, when Margaritaville opened its first residential community. Hundreds of potential buyers camped out overnight, waiting in line like concertgoers for the chance to purchase homes. The company responded by distributing free pizza and arranging entertainment, turning a property sale into a neighborhood celebration.

This was beyond clever marketing. It revealed a deeper insight: Margaritaville had created something beyond real estate. As Cohlan reflects on the brand's approach: "We were trying to create what we are today but on a smaller scale — a lifestyle environment where people come to relax and escape. We wanted to celebrate the idea that when you work hard, you should have time off." The community aspect became both product differentiator and revenue multiplier.

Today, branded resort-style communities operate in Florida and South Carolina. Each property serves as both destination and realization of the lifestyle promise, creating what industry observers describe as experiential real estate.

Multi-Generational Revenue

One of Margaritaville's accomplishments is spanning demographic sectors without losing brand cohesiveness. The portfolio attracts families seeking vacation experiences, millennials drawn to authentic lifestyle messaging, culinary enthusiasts, and baby boomers ready for active adult communities.

This broad appeal stems from focusing on experiences and emotions rather than products. Whether guests engage through resort stays, community living, or lifestyle products like the popular Frozen Concoction Maker, the emphasis is always on creating memorable moments that reinforce the brand promise.

The approach should sound familiar: when experiences matter more than objects, brands that can deliver authentic, story-driven encounters gain a long-term competitive advantage.

Margaritaville By the Numbers

Portfolio Scale

- Nearly 3 dozen branded resort-style communities across the U.S., Mexico, and Caribbean
- 20 million annual travelers across all properties
- 20+ new properties opened in the past 5 years

Revenue Diversification

- Hotels and luxury resorts
- 55+ active adult communities
- Timeshares and vacation clubs
- Cruise experiences and RV resorts
- Consumer lifestyle products
- All-inclusive destinations



Here's a Twist

An Idea for Forward-Thinking Brands
Seedlip Sanctuary

Where wellness meets sophistication. This distilled no-alcohol spirits brand's resort reimagines indulgence: Craft mocktails in hand-blown glasses, spa rituals infused with botanicals from Seedlip's signature blends, and sunrise yoga among herb gardens. Guests immerse in a sensorial journey that celebrates flavor, clarity, and restorative living, embodying the art of mindful luxury.

The Replication Challenge

What makes Margaritaville's success particularly noteworthy is how difficult it would be to replicate. The brand benefits from decades of trust from a loyal fanbase and a cultural mindset that cannot be manufactured through traditional marketing. The authenticity premium creates competitive moats that deepen over time, similar to heritage brands yet accessible to broader demographics.

More importantly, the expansion demonstrates that powerful brand extensions often move entirely beyond the original product category. By focusing on underlying lifestyle aspirations rather than specific delivery mechanisms, Margaritaville created space for unlimited expansion possibilities while maintaining brand integrity.

Lessons for Brand Builders

The Margaritaville story offers insights for brands seeking authentic growth. Culture cannot be manufactured; it must be discovered, carefully developed, and thoughtfully maintained in an honest way daily. Successful lifestyle brands require multiple touchpoints that serve the same emotional need while addressing practical considerations across life stages. Most critically, maintaining brand integrity during expansion requires systematic partnership evaluation and unwavering commitment to core values.

For spirits industry professionals observing brand evolution strategies, Margaritaville demonstrates that the most viable extensions focus on the *emotional* job the brand performs rather than the specific product it delivers. In an increasingly complex marketplace, that clarity of purpose becomes the basis of unlimited growth.

BRAND HOMES

SCALABILITY

OUTLOOK

INSIGHTS AND OUTLOOK

The spirits landscape is changing, and forward-thinking brands are seizing the moment. Traditional marketing channels are growing more expensive. Brands face difficulty harnessing attention. A consumer loses interest faster than you can finish a shot. Happily, a new frontier has emerged that's reshaping how spirits companies connect, while generating additional revenue: brand homes.

Unlike traditional marketing, which typically involves short-term engagements and produces less consumer data, brand homes offer a more impactful and lasting interaction. These range from a full museum experience like Galleria Campari in Milan, which highlights Campari's artistic legacy, to a traditional distillery tour in a historic setting. Some brand homes are ticketed, while others, like the Sazerac House in New Orleans, offer free experiences. Many are designed to collect better audience data, providing valuable insights for brands.

And the timing couldn't be better. Consumer interest in craft spirits, artisanal production, and authentic experiences continue to grow. Younger consumers actively seek out brands that offer transparency, sustainability, and meaningful connections. Brand homes meet these desires while creating long-term competitive advantages.

What are brand homes?

Brand homes are physical locations where consumers can participate in a brand's story and products. These aren't just tasting rooms or visitor centers on steroids. They're spaces that transform simple product sampling into opportunities for immersive storytelling. This experience can turn a casual visitor into a loyal brand ambassador. It can also create new revenue streams that extend far beyond bottle sales. Brand homes represent a shift in how spirits companies are thinking about customer relationships, brand building, and in many cases, revenue generation.

ROI OF BRAND HOMES VS. TRADITIONAL MARKETING



ROI OF BRAND HOMES VS. TRADITIONAL MARKETING

The Operational Advantages

Brand homes also provide direct customer feedback that can inform product development, packaging decisions, and marketing strategies. They can create opportunities for limited releases and exclusive experiences that command premium pricing. And, they can serve as content creation hubs, generating authentic material for digital marketing campaigns while reducing external marketing costs.

The scalability potential is significant. Successful brand home concepts can be replicated across multiple markets, franchised to local partners, or adapted for temporary installations that bring the experience to new audiences. Each expansion multiplies the revenue potential while spreading fixed costs across a larger base.

The success of brand homes can lead to further diversification, such as extensions into hotels and other hospitality ventures. This creates new revenue streams and allows brands to become integral to customers' lifestyles, moving beyond just beverage sales. LVMH's Ardbeg Hotel is a prime example of this trend. Of note, expanding from the core into adjacent verticals offers a profitable hedge against declining liquor sales.

Breaking the Heritage Monopoly

For challenger brands, brand homes can level the playing field. While established players dominate retail shelf space and can afford premium media placements, a well-executed brand home allows newer brands to create memorable experiences that compete directly with industry giants. Even challenger brands — such as Beyoncé's SirDavis Whisky —

have an opportunity to build strong fandom and be associated with a destination or celebrity.

The **experience economy** has markedly changed consumer expectations. Today's spirits consumers don't just want to drink a product, they want to understand its story and connect with its values. They want to feel like part of something bigger. Brand homes can democratize this connection in ways that traditional marketing can't replicate, no matter if you are a heritage or a challenger brand. Are you ready?

The Return on Investment Extends Across Multiple Dimensions

The numbers tell a compelling story. Spirits brands operating brand homes report significant revenue diversification that helps buffer against market fluctuations. When bottle sales face headwinds, these spaces generate income through merchandise, events, experiences, and premium offerings. This creates multiple revenue streams that reduce dependence on alcohol sales alone.

Beyond diversification, brand homes excel at building customer lifetime value in ways that conventional spirits marketing approaches miss entirely. Visitors develop deeper connections with brands through immersive experiences, leading to increased loyalty and higher lifetime spending. They become repeat purchasers, buy premium offerings, and bring friends, creating a multiplier effect that extends far beyond the initial visit.

This enhanced lifetime value stems from the deeper emotional connections these experiences

create. For example, the **Sazerac House's 4.9/5.0 Google rating and high ranking among New Orleans attractions demonstrates the kind of memorable experiences that keep customers engaged with the brand long after they leave.**

Direct revenue from experiences, merchandise, and premium offerings provides immediate returns. Increased brand loyalty and customer lifetime value create long-term financial benefits. Enhanced brand equity strengthens market position and supports premium pricing. All three are necessary for lasting brand health.

The investment in brand homes represents more than facility development. It's building infrastructure for the future of spirits marketing. As digital advertising becomes more expensive and less effective, as retail consolidation reduces shelf space opportunities, and as consumer attention becomes increasingly fragmented, brand homes offer a controlled environment where companies can tell their complete story without competition or distraction.

Final Thoughts

The spirits industry is at an inflection point. Brands that recognize the strategic value of brand homes and invest in creating authentic, engaging experiences will capture disproportionate market share and build resilient business models. Those that continue relying solely on traditional marketing approaches will find themselves increasingly marginalized in a marketplace that rewards genuine connection over simple product promotion.



A photograph of two men at a bar, both holding small glasses of whisky to their lips and drinking. The man on the left is wearing a dark blue shirt, and the man on the right is wearing a denim jacket over a white t-shirt. In the foreground, there are three glasses of beer on the bar. The background is a dimly lit bar with warm, bokeh-style lights.

THE SCALABILITY ROI OF IRL MARKETING

HOW ONE BRAND
OUTPERFORMED AN ENTIRE
COUNTRY

5.3 Million: A Number That Should Make Spirits Industry Execs Stop Scrolling

That's how many visitors Ole Smoky Moonshine welcomed across their four Tennessee locations in 2023. To put that in perspective, it's more than double the 2+ million tourists who visited all of Scotland's whisky distilleries combined. One American moonshine brand outpaced an entire country's centuries-old whisky industry. Ole Smoky cracked the code on scalable IRL marketing.

The Replicability Revolution: Great Stories and Great Systems

Ole Smoky didn't just build a business; it built a template. Its "Shine Shack" formula works whether it's deployed at a NASCAR event, amid the tourist chaos of Gatlinburg, or rooted in the heart of Nashville's music scene. The core experience — welcome, story, tasting, retail, photo opportunity — remains consistent while adjusting to local flavor.

This is experiential marketing's holy grail: authentic yet replicable. Ole Smoky's Tennessee

moonshine story resonates in any American tourist market, from mountain getaways to urban music scenes. Its brand ambassadors deliver identical narratives with the same engaging personality, whether it's in a pop-up or a permanent location.

The Template That Conquered Tourism

Ole Smoky's brilliance lies in its systematic approach. The brand has standardized everything that matters: staff training protocols, experience timing, merchandise strategy, even its POS systems. Yet, it has left ample space for local adaptation. Its Gatlinburg sites lean into mountain themes while Nashville locations emphasize music culture. But the core moonshine experience remains identical.

This isn't just operational efficiency; it's strategic genius. Every visitor interaction reinforces the same brand story, creating brand equity that Scotland's dispersed approach can't match. When someone visits Ole Smoky in Pigeon Forge and later sees it at a NASCAR event, the recognition is instant and reinforcing.

The Mathematics of Multiplication

The ROI math speaks for itself. Ole Smoky made a one-time investment in developing a scalable template, then positioned it in high-traffic tourist corridors. Its 5.3 million visitors are concentrated across four — soon to be five — strategically placed facilities, creating operational efficiency and brand multiplication.

The visitor concentration tells the story: Ole Smoky's Gatlinburg flagship alone (The Holler) attracted 2.2 million visitors in 2023, more than all of Scotland's distilleries in their primary markets combined. That's the power of scalable systems versus location-dependent experiences.

What This Means For Your Brand

The Ole Smoky model isn't just about moonshine. It's about recognizing what elements of your brand story can scale and what constraints keep you tied to specific locations. So, spirits brand execs should ask themselves not only, "How authentic is our story?" but "How replicable is our experience?" Can your brand narrative work across multiple tourist markets? Can your operational systems maintain high quality while scaling? Can you design experiences that will still feel authentic?

Scotland's distilleries will always have centuries of heritage. But Ole Smoky proved something commercially valuable too: in the modern spirits industry, the brands that build scalable IRL systems can capture disproportionate market share.

The future belongs to brands that can bottle authenticity into a template that travels. Are you building an experience and building a system?

Heritage Doesn't Mean Inertia: How Scottish Distilleries Can Scale Differently

The perceived limitation of Scotland's distilleries — their rootedness in place — is actually a branding strength. Scotland's whisky brands don't have to recreate distilleries in tourist corridors. Instead, they can scale through mobile storytelling: immersive touring exhibits, cultural pop-ups, airport activations, brand homes in key cities, and digital-physical hybrids that bring the heritage story to life, far away from the glens and isles.

From Four Corners to One Story

While each of the iconic, heritage-rich expressions: Speyside, Highland, Lowland, and Islay, are the focus of Johnnie Walker's [Four Corners Distilleries](#), the flagship [Princes Street](#) experience in Edinburgh reimagines what a *home* means for

a global whisky brand. It connects these distinct distilleries through a unified narrative arc, creating an experience that scales across regions — and resonates globally. The concept weaves the different expressions through curated, interconnected storytelling.

Scaling Heritage: Beyond Buildings to Brand Worlds

The opportunity for heritage brands isn't to copy other models, but to learn from their replicable systems and ask:

- Can we create modular brand extensions in high-traffic travel hubs like airports, festivals, and cultural districts?
- Can we standardize parts of the visitor journey (e.g., story structure, tasting language, retail flow) without diluting our heritage?
- Can we build a connected ecosystem of experiences, where each location adds to a broader brand world?

Heritage brands win when they scale meaningfully, by extending emotions, rituals, and stories. The future isn't either/or, it's both/and. Ole Smoky's *template* approach. Johnnie Walker's *storyworld* strategy. Or something else. That's how IRL marketing moves from local experiences to global brand-building, no matter your starting point.



Building a Replicable Experience

Design Assessment

Before you can scale, you need to know what scales. Start by dissecting your brand story for universal appeal. Does your narrative work across different geographic markets and tourist demographics? *Ole Smoky's* moonshine tradition resonates throughout American tourist culture. A story tied to specific regional history might not travel.

Experience standardization comes next. Which elements must remain identical to maintain brand integrity, and which can adapt locally? Ole Smoky keeps its core experience flow identical: 20-30 minutes, same tasting sequence, same educational content. But it also allows space for local themes to flavor the presentation.

Systematic Deployment

Your template should be perfected before scaling. Ole Smoky fine-tuned its Gatlinburg flagship before expanding, ensuring its systems could maintain high quality and consistency. Document everything: setup requirements, training protocols, technology specifications. Future locations should feel identical to your first, just in a different setting.

Technology integration matters more than most brands realize. Consistent POS systems, visitor tracking, and feedback collection aren't just operational necessities, they're brand consistency tools. When a visitor moves from the tasting experience to your retail area, the transition should feel seamless, regardless of location.

Scale Management

Quality control becomes critical as you grow. Develop metrics that track template effectiveness at each location and create a feedback loop that lets improvements at one site enhance the others. The goal isn't just growth: it's sustainable, profitable, quality growth that strengthens rather than dilutes your brand.

One To Many

The template advantage is mathematical: Ole Smoky invested once in developing its experience design, training program, and operational systems. Every subsequent location extends that investment, spreading fixed development costs across multiple revenue streams. Compare this to Scotland's model, where each distillery requires separate experience investment and specialized training.

Brand-building accelerates under the template model. Every Ole Smoky location reinforces the same brand message. When you visit Ole Smoky locations, you're not experiencing different brands, you're deepening your relationship with one consistent brand story.

Concentrated Excellence

The numbers speak for themselves. Ole Smoky's four locations generate 5.3 million visits through strategic tourist corridor placement. The approach means visitors know what to expect, driving repeat visits and reliable referrals. Consistency breeds confidence.

The lesson when scalability is driving your IRL strategy: concentrated excellence beats hit-or-miss execution. Ole Smoky proves that tourists prefer reliable, high-quality experiences when deciding how to spend their tourism dollars.



OUTLOOK & RECOMMENDATIONS

WHY SPIRITS BRANDS
MUST THINK LIKE
EXPERIENCE PLATFORMS

Life is More Interesting When You Say Yes. — Sir Richard Branson

What we're witnessing is a sea change that extends far beyond alcohol. Entire industries have learned that great products alone no longer define market leadership. The most revered brands are those which have discovered that the future isn't about choosing between tradition and innovation. It's about finding authentic ways to expand beyond their original category while honoring what makes the brand cherished. The most successful spirits brands are discovering that too. The future isn't a choice between heritage and innovation, it's both. Brands will widen their scope and deepen what made them beloved in the first place.

The Evolving Consumer Landscape

No matter which study you look at, it's clear that many people are thinking about alcohol differently. While recent [Gallup polling](#) shows self-reported drinking rates at historic lows, industry data suggests a more nuanced picture. [IWSR research](#) indicates much of the recent decline represents a stabilization after pandemic-era peaks rather than a fundamental shift away from alcohol.

Perhaps most importantly, emerging evidence points to a 'drinking better, not less' trend, where consumers prioritize quality over quantity and seek premium experiences over routine consumption. This shift coincides with broader cultural movements that prioritize authentic connections, meaningful experiences, and community building, particularly among younger generations navigating an increasingly digital world.

These evolving preferences underscore why forward-thinking spirits brands are diversifying beyond pure product sales. Brands that invest in lifestyle experiences, cultural relevance, and community building create multiple revenue streams and deeper customer relationships while positioning themselves for sustained growth regardless of consumption fluctuations.

The Three-Ingredient Formula

After analyzing hundreds of brand homes, experiential strategies, and successful lifestyle extensions, three core ingredients emerge as essential for brands making the transition from liquid to lifestyle:

1. Collaboration over Competition

Spirits brands recognize they don't have to build everything themselves. Strategic partnerships amplify authenticity while reducing risk. Chinese liquor brands partnering with cultural heritage museums. Craft distilleries collaborating with tourism organizations. Strategic alliances across industries demonstrate how brands can achieve scale and cultural relevance without losing authenticity.

The U.S. Open's partnership with Grey Goose through the [Honey Deuce](#) cocktail exemplifies this approach. What began as a simple signature drink has become tennis's most profitable cocktail, generating \$12.8 million from 556,782 drinks during the 2024 tournament alone, creating value for both the tournament (a signature experience) and the spirits brand (a premium placement).

Imagine a Hall of Fame of Mixology backed by multiple spirits brands, celebrating the craft rather than individual products. These collaborations work because they solve a fundamental challenge: how to achieve scale and cultural relevance without losing authenticity. When brands pool resources around shared values, everyone wins.

2. Strategic Brand Extension

This isn't diversification for the sake of it. These are logical extensions of brand DNA into new verticals. Death & Co's hotel strategy works, for example, because cocktail culture and hospitality share common ground. Margaritaville's retirement communities succeed because escapism appeals across life stages. These extensions become particularly valuable as they create revenue streams that complement rather than depend entirely on traditional consumption patterns.

Travel represents the biggest opportunity here. River cruises stopping at distilleries. Journeys by train through vineyard regions. Destination resorts where guests pick their own botanicals and watch them be crafted into spirits. The travel sector's continued growth, combined with post-pandemic desire for meaningful experiences, has created numerous avenues for immersive brand experiences.

3. Story as Strategy

Every major lifestyle brand has discovered that story isn't marketing, it's infrastructure. In an age of digital overwhelm, authentic human narratives become even more precious. The most powerful stories often lie hidden in brand histories, waiting to be rediscovered. What family betrayals, love triangles, or moments of triumph could become the foundation for Netflix-worthy content?

Strategic storytelling creates exponential returns. When Formula 1 partnered with Netflix for [Drive to Survive](#), it didn't just gain viewers, it gained fans willing to pay premium prices for experiences. Spirits brands with rich histories are perfectly positioned to replicate this success.

The Netflix series [House of Guinness](#) demonstrates this potential perfectly. The eight-part drama follows the Guinness family's late 19th century inheritance struggles, transforming authentic family history into premium entertainment that will undoubtedly drive renewed brand interest, proving that spirits brands possess ready-made material for modern-day storytelling.

OUTLOOK & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Community Advantage in the Digital Age

The brands winning today understand that authenticity often comes through partnership rather than ownership. As our digital world increasingly shapes how we work and interact, the human desire for genuine community and connection intensifies. Tourism organizations need compelling reasons to drive visitors to new destinations. Heritage institutions need modern relevance. Spirits brands need cultural credibility. Most importantly, consumers need the human connection they increasingly crave.

These are win-win collaborations. The distillery becomes a tourism anchor. The region gains a cultural draw. Communities unlock local economic upside. And people have one more wonderful reason to gather.

The Experience Economy Meets Spirits

Traditional advertising restrictions in many markets make experiential marketing even more valuable. When Paris prohibits liquor advertising, brand homes and pop-up experiences provide workarounds for reaching consumers where conventional media cannot.

The math is compelling: even when running at break-even, these experiences often outstrip the ROI of traditional media. The key metric isn't profit per visitor, it's cost per meaningful brand connection. Experience-driven marketing allows brands to focus on heritage, craftsmanship, and cultural contribution rather than consumption messaging alone.

More importantly, these experiences create the kind of memories that traditional advertising can't replicate. When someone has crafted their own gin in a botanical workshop, attended a storytelling session in a pirate tavern, or slept in a distillery-themed hotel room, they're not just remembering a product. They're recalling when a moment became part of their personal story.

Looking Forward

The brands that will dominate the next decade are already making moves. They're combing through their histories for untold stories. They're building business models that create value beyond traditional consumption metrics. They're identifying natural partners in tourism, culture, and hospitality. They're viewing their brand homes not as marketing expenses but as content factories fueling ongoing digital engagement.

Examples like the Honey Deuce's evolution from simple cocktail to cultural icon demonstrate how single innovations can become traditions when properly nurtured, while projects like *House of Guinness* show how heritage brands can leverage authentic histories for contemporary relevance.

Most importantly, these brands recognize that this evolution requires patience. You can't manufacture cultural relevance overnight, but you can build it steadily through consistent storytelling, intentional partnerships, and experiences that feel generous rather than promotional.

The transition from liquid to lifestyle isn't about abandoning what made these brands loved. It's about finding new ways to share that love with larger audiences in deeper, more meaningful ways. In an age where artificial intelligence handles more of our routine interactions, the brands that master authentic human connection through story, community, and shared experience will command premium loyalty.

As the industry continues to evolve, the winners will be those brave enough to expand their definition of what a spirits brand can be, while never losing sight of what made them worth customer loyalty in the first place.



ABOUT

WHO WE ARE

AUTHORS

WHO WE ARE

Solomon Group

Solomon Group is a creative production agency where innovators bring bold ideas to life. Our producer-led model gives us the unique flexibility to craft events, exhibits, experiences, and activations that challenge what's possible. Clients rely on our decades of expertise in creativity, industry knowledge, and problem-solving to deliver meaningful experiences that foster emotional connections and transform audiences into loyal fans. From concept to completion, we're the behind-the-scenes team when you hear that applause — and there's no other place we'd rather be. Learn more about how we're truly made for this at www.solomongroup.com

FINN Partners

FINN Partners is one of the fastest-growing independent global agencies with a heart and conscience. Across 35 offices worldwide, our expertise spans arts and culture, travel, hospitality, consumer lifestyle and luxury. Through hands-on partnership and highly specialized knowledge, FINN transforms business insights into strategic communications and bold creative campaigns that build brand equity, shape culture, and drive growth in complex markets. www.finnpartners.com

Tales of the Cocktail

Tales of the Cocktail is the world's premier cocktail festival and spirits industry conference, bringing together bartenders, brand executives, and hospitality professionals annually in New Orleans. Beyond the festival, Tales serves as a year-round platform for industry education, innovation, and community building through events, competitions, and advocacy programs that advance cocktail culture globally. www.talesofthecocktail.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Daniel Hettwer

Chief Strategy Officer, Solomon Group

Favorite Drink: Aperol Spritz for happy hour, Negroni for a nightcap

Daniel Hettwer is Chief Strategy Officer at Solomon Group, where he leads company-wide strategy across live events and permanent experiences. His remit spans growth planning, market positioning, strategic partnerships, and the frameworks that connect creative work to measurable business outcomes. In addition to strategy, he works closely with the experience team, bringing a background in behavioral science and storytelling that adds a human-centered lens to decision-making, helping productions resonate more deeply and perform more effectively.

Prior to becoming CSO, he joined Solomon Group's immersive-destinations practice as Director of Strategy & Business Development, guiding projects from early concept through activation. He is also the founder of Impactainment, a United Nations-accredited initiative focused on mission-driven experiences, and a founding member of the World Experience Organization (WXO).

daniel.hettwer@solomongroup.com



Celia Jones

Global CMO, FINN Partners

Favorite Drink: Lychee Martini

Celia is a seasoned brand marketer & corporate communications leader with a proven track record of driving next-level growth for agencies and brands.

Under her leadership, FINN has solidified its reputation as a world-class agency and trusted strategic partner—building brands, powering businesses and championing cultural change through integrity, ingenuity, and innovation that drives real-world impact.

Delivering a true 360-degree approach that combines boutique service and global scale, FINN has earned recognition as one of Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, Midsize Agency of the Year and Top Consumer Agency by PRovoke Media, and a 5x OBSERVER Best PR Firm in America.

celia.jones@finnpartners.com



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