

BEST PRACTICES IN TRADE SHOWS AND EVENTS

EXHIBITOR

EVENT AWARDS



PRIVATE TRADE SHOW

Company: IBM Corp. **Event:** IBM Think **Objectives:** Connect with a diverse array of IBM customers, show synergies in today's technology solutions, and reveal IBM as a technology thought leader. **Strategy:** Consolidate IBM's user conferences into one and curate experiences that illuminate what's possible when man and machine work together. **Tactics:** Launch IBM's first Think conference and bring abstract IBM technology solutions to life through tangible storytelling and interactive experiences across four campuses. **Results:** Drew 30,000 attendees to the debut Think event, enticed 90 percent of attendees to visit all four campuses showcasing IBM solutions, and moved 80 percent of attendees to indicate they would attend Think again. **Creative/Production Agency:** George P. Johnson, www.gpj.com **Budget:** \$5 million or more

PHOTOS: GEORGE P. JOHNSON CREATIVE AND PRODUCTION CREWS AND GRANBURY STUDIOS PHOTOGRAPHY

IBM's New Way of Thinking

IBM Corp. launches a new flagship conference to inspire and earn loyalty from many distinct audiences, garnering a positive response in the form of 80 percent of attendees clamoring to return in 2019. By Kelli Billstein

Humankind's development of and now dependency on technology solutions seemed to happen overnight, like a digital dream. The companies that bring these technologies to market operate on the bleeding edge of the digital frontier. Their job is to capture lightning in a bottle, then develop, simplify, and distribute it to the world.

While this frontier is a thrilling and powerful place to be, it's not enough for tech giants to function like genius scientists in a lab concocting new technology tools from dawn to dusk. They must also be digital stewards in the technology space, connecting with their customers on a human level and showing them how the advancements they develop can be applied in the real world.

Enter IBM Corp., one of the 800-pound gorillas in the global technology jungle that brings countless solutions to market, from hardware to software, artificial intelligence (AI) to cloud, products to services. And in order to sustain its position as an industry heavyweight, "Big Blue" must maintain expert status in all things tech.

Around 2014, however, a fly appeared in the ointment, the tickle of a notion that could upset IBM's stronghold. Experts at the company forecast that the tides were beginning to turn in ways that emphasized delicate confluences of technological ideas, services, and tools. Big data was starting to overlap with the cloud; the Internet of Things (IoT) was intersecting with cybersecurity. The initial ripples of these integrations represented a threat for IBM because, at the time, many of the company's product and service offerings were operating in silos. In terms of events, these silos played out in the form of seven unique conferences, most serving users of IBM's key software brands.

It's true that IBM is many things to many different people, but the company had to confront the fact that standalone events would not be a viable solution to feed distinct customers' loyalties forever. Unless IBM read the writing on the wall and started identifying synergies in its solutions, unifying its offerings under one end-to-end umbrella, and merging its events, it ran the risk of being seen as a technology laggard instead of a tech leader.

All of this implied a go-big-or-go-home undertaking for IBM. And you better believe Big Blue was going big. Therefore, this yet-to-be-determined event had to be about more than just bringing IBM's diverse customers together in one central place to efficiently cultivate a following. It had to be a clarion call that would resonate with attendees on an emotional level and offer tangible ways for them to see, touch, and connect with every flavor of the world's latest, most complex technologies.



Cloud and Data

IBM Corp.'s Think event was organized into four distinct campuses. A central element in the Cloud and Data area was a pair of 18-foot-tall airplane fins, a real-world reference to how American Airlines Inc. uses IBM's cloud technology to store massive amounts of data.

"We wanted to create efficiencies across IBM, telling one consistent story to our customers," says Dee Hall, program director of IBM conferences and events. "Our goal was for attendees to understand from a high level how IBM was harnessing technology to shape and change the world, and to realize that they could use IBM's products and services to shape and change the world, too."

Uploading an Idea

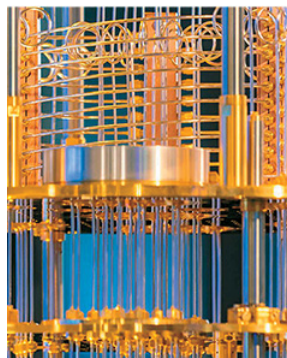
To begin tackling these challenges, IBM united with its longtime experiential-marketing agency, George P. Johnson (GPJ). In Marie Kondo fashion, IBM decluttered its stable of events over the course of four years. Conferences were combined where it made sense, and GPJ ensured that the experiences on the show floors at these freshly conjoined events delivered a recognizable experience among discrete audiences. In this way, IBM tidied up its event inventory and took strides to ease loyal customers and users in a slightly different direction.

"Meanwhile, we were having lots of conversations around the IBM brand, asking what was at the heart of the brand and what it stood for. We were focused on teasing out how we could architect the experience to create not just another tech conference but something that conveyed the essence of the brand and had the power to become a cultural event," says Chris Goveia, vice president and executive creative director at GPJ.

The glue that would bind IBM's new conference together was actually a single word that had been ingrained in the company culture for more than a century. Back in 1914, the seminal CEO of IBM, Thomas J. Watson, left a cultural legacy through his popularized slogan, "Think," claiming that the best chance any individual had for success was to exercise that organ inside the human cranium. "Think," then, was the ideal event name and brand touchstone.

"It all came together with 'think.' The word and the concept carried the spirit of IBM," says Robin Kleban, vice president and account director in support of IBM Conferences at GPJ. "Mobilizing around the core principle of 'think,' IBM's solutions are elevated to a different level of understanding – and overall feeling – in the market."

Big Blue went one step further as it thought about how the brand would translate at the event, since it was crucial that IBM be seen as both a digital steward and technology leader. Therefore, the theme of man and machine working together to shape and change the world was adopted, and storytelling tactics were employed to bring abstract technology solutions into sharp relief for IBM's multiple clans of customers and partners.



Modern Infrastructure

In this campus, IBM's new Q server shimmered like a gold chandelier and became a popular photo op. Another draw was the Red Bull Formula 1 race car. Nearby touchscreens explained how IBM storage technology streamlines data analysis for F1 racing.

Thinking Out Loud

On March 19, 2018, Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas was clad in shades of signature blue to herald IBM's inaugural Think event. Thousands of attendees swarmed the venue, eager to learn what this new, high-profile conference had in store for them.

Think was organized to focus on four main areas (cloud and data, business and AI, security and resiliency, and modern infrastructure), each spanning a more than 30,000-square-foot campus. The campus moniker and organizational structure was a nod to IBM's commitment to education and has since become a best practice for Think conferences. But before attendees could explore each of these educational quads, they first flowed through the dramatic Welcome Experience.

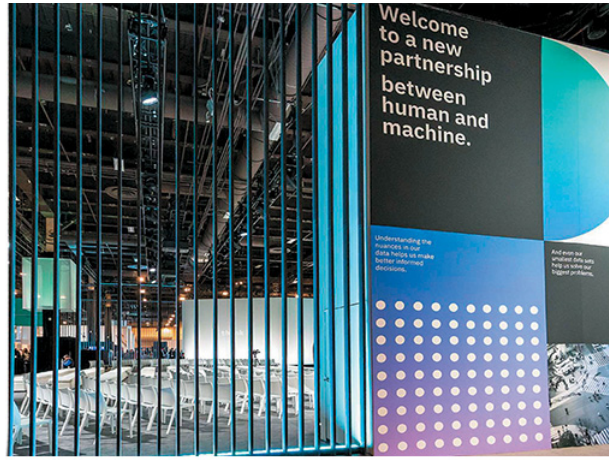
Passing five glowing, 9-foot-tall LED lightbox letters that spelled out "think," attendees triggered sequenced media that appeared on a 9-by-39-foot screen and continued through a 25-foot-long, 15-foot-wide tunnel comprising flush LED panels. All the screens wove together visuals to display vivid previews of IBM client stories.

To further explore IBM's service offerings, attendees were invited up a flight of stairs flanking the Welcome Experience – an ascent that revealed a second level perched on top of the polychromatic tunnel. Here, the Progress Bar awaited. Taking its cues from a modern Japanese sushi bar, a conveyor belt of goodies circulated around a 20-by-6-foot table, and attendees seated at the bar helped themselves to branded cold-press coffee, popcorn, and 3-D-printed objects that represented clients' experiences with the company's technology offerings.

Attendees could learn more about a story by tapping through a self-guided digital narrative on any of six touchscreens embedded in the Progress Bar itself. One 3-D-printed object, for example, was in the shape of an athletic cleat and told the story of how the Mercedes Benz Stadium utilized IBM services to leverage mobile app development and network innovation.

Back on the show floor, the campus quadrants served as home bases to certain groups of attendees, though they naturally explored outside their areas of expertise as well. Synergies abounded among the different technologies that were on tap at Think. For example, discussion of AI flowed seamlessly into a conversation about cybersecurity, just as banter about data evolved into chatter about AI. As such, traffic flowed effortlessly from one display to the next, and from one campus to another.

"Guiding and building bonds with attendees was central to our planning, and we thought about the attendee journey from the moment guests arrived," Goveia says. "To ensure there was a sense of brand consistency, the campuses needed to feel unified yet have their own unique expression."



Business and AI

The Business and AI campus highlighted IBM's latest advancements in artificial intelligence. Activations related to robotic manufacturing and automated driving centered on the message that man and machine are partners in the quest to improve the world.

The Cloud and Data campus was certainly provocative, and stood out on the show floor thanks to an 18-foot-tall sculptural airplane tail fin embedded with lights that glimmered to suggest air currents during flight. Drawn as if by magnetic force to the sculpture, attendees immersed themselves in the client story that it represented: American Airlines Inc.'s use of IBM's cloud technology to store massive amounts of data so that, in the scenario of a flight delay or cancellation, passengers could access self-service tools via an app and navigate an alternate solution on their mobile devices. The story was told through touchscreens that were built into a wrap-around counter surrounding the tail fin. Attendees interested in learning more about how IBM data and cloud technology could work for their businesses could visit The Garage, a set of two meeting rooms staffed with consultants who were happy to discuss cloud-related ideas and solutions.

In essence, each campus was designed with an attendee journey in mind. Pulled into an activity or display that told an emotional technology story, attendees were then invited to proceed into a theater area within each campus to listen as keynote speakers elaborated on how that particular technology was disrupting and changing the world. The wheels in attendees' brains were hopefully then greased enough to migrate to one of the "think tank" spaces within each campus – quiet areas where guests could engage in roundtable conversation with IBM experts about how the product or service available on that particular campus could come to life for them.

The Modern Infrastructure campus delighted the server geeks among the attendees. The new Q server, shimmering like an elaborate gold chandelier, was on full display, and attendees lined up to bask in its copper glow or to snap selfies with it. Supplemental information about how IBM's refrigerator-sized Q or Z server could upgrade a business's infrastructure flanked the display platforms, and staffers were ready to field questions. To bring a client story into the mix, IBM displayed a snazzy Red Bull Formula 1 race car accompanied by

touchscreens that elaborated on how IBM storage technology streamlined data analysis, allowing real-time insights for F1 racing.

"We wanted to include displays like the Red Bull race car to attract and satisfy different types of attendees," Kleban says. "Whether or not you're involved in infrastructure, you can experience this and relate to it because it's a high-level enough story. That's the beauty of having a variety of activations for an audience of 30,000 – it helps to address many different customer profiles."

Even more diverse activations abounded on the Business and AI campus, where attendees encountered the most future-forward of IBM's offerings: AI. Emblazoned on a wall inside this campus were the words "Welcome to a new partnership between man and machine." Showcasing IBM's Watson Primer (its answer to AI technology), the campus wowed visitors with engagements such as a peek at the advancements in AI-enabled robotic manufacturing and autonomous driving. These examples illuminated how IBM was leading the way on a journey in which man and machine were partners, improving the world one technology solution at a time. "It wasn't a man or machine narrative; it was man and machine," Hall says.

Finally, attendees could experience the Security and Resiliency campus, which highlighted the fortitude that companies could enjoy in the face of cyber threats thanks to IBM's Security Solutions combining AI, cloud, and collaboration tools. Inspired by real-life security operations centers, IBM's Disruption Dome activation offered a simulation of cybersecurity crises. Taking the form of a semi-open arena, the activation's pièce de résistance was an 18-foot canopy upon which an immersive, game-like activity played out. Attendees were put in the shoes of one of six security personas dealing with a crisis. Content guiding the scenario flashed across the overhead canvas as attendees learned how IBM's security solutions spring into action when triggered by suspicious network activity.



Security and Resiliency

IBM's Security Solutions took center stage in the Security and Resiliency campus. A gaming activation under an 18-foot-diameter canopy put attendees in an immersive scenario in which they learned how IBM's AI, cloud, and collaboration tools combat cybersecurity threats.

Beyond the four campuses, Think attendees could further indulge their curiosity about all things IBM by visiting the Think Academy and DevZone spaces. Here, attendees feasted on a veritable buffet of educational offerings.

More than a thousand labs and 300 different certifications were in full force, providing a year's worth of professional education in just four days at the conference.

As if the multilayered experiences on the four campuses were not enough, Think also offered ample networking opportunities in IBM's Business Partner Zone and the Executive Center. These were places where attendees could recharge, trade business cards, and brush shoulders with other technophiles in similar industries. And at the end of the day, entertainment included classic tunes from Train, Barenaked Ladies, and The Chainsmokers.

Downloading the Results

The event-consolidation strategy could've been a gamble, but IBM went into its debut Think conference with the confidence of a card shark, knowing it had a story to tell to every attendee that would excite them and motivate their thinking about IBM's products and services. Of IBM's approach to Think, one Corporate Event Awards judge said, "This event is a best-practice example that should be recognized by every industry. Rather than silo its offerings, IBM showed attendees the future and how various technologies come together to create true innovations."

A whopping 30,000 attendees from 101 countries filled the convention hall. But IBM knew that sheer attendance figures were not enough to gauge the event's success. Post-event surveys were sent to attendees to discover if Think had truly hit home in the big way IBM had hoped. Responses came back highly positive, with 80 percent of attendees indicating that they were thrilled about their first Think conference and fully intended to return for Think 2019. What's more, IBM saw the crossflow of techie intrigue that it had anticipated, as more than 90 percent of attendees visited all four campuses.

"The results IBM achieved are incredible, especially given the fact this was a first-year event," raved one judge. Just as its historic visionary Thomas J. Watson would have advised, IBM did some serious thinking to pull off its first-ever, end-to-end event, and it yielded an award-winning strategy for continued success. E