

july 2019

# *the* **RISE OF IMPACT ENTERTAINMENT**

presented by  **participant media** + **SOULPANCAKE**

in partnership with **BRANDSTORYTELLING**  
survey conducted by **The Harris Poll**

**“**

**The time has come  
to use the infinite  
power of story,  
as expressed through  
entertainment...  
to inspire  
social impact.**

**—TERI SCHWARTZ**

Dean @ UCLA School of Theater, Film + Television

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**Social impact is  
a team sport.**

**—DAVID LINDE** CEO @ Participant Media

# WELCOME.

As more brands, media companies, and corporations seek to connect with an ever growing, socially conscious consumer base, entertainment companies Participant Media and SoulPancake, in partnership with Brand Storytelling, set out to understand how brand marketers think about entertainment—specifically traditional entertainment—as a means to spark meaningful dialogue and generate compelling social change around the world’s most pressing issues. This white paper—conducted by The Harris Poll—explores the growing field of “impact entertainment” and is based on a survey asking more than 500 marketers to share their thoughts on this emerging space.

The survey reveals profound shifts in the ways marketers are engaging with consumers. Many advertisers are moving away from having their brand messaging front and center and, instead, bringing their social mission and purpose work to the forefront. Interest in this category is accelerating throughout the industry—with pioneering brands creating impact entertainment (see [Case Studies](#)) and festivals such as Tribeca and Cannes Lions creating awards in the category.

But, as the survey reveals, marketers perceive significant challenges in **THE RISE OF IMPACT ENTERTAINMENT** as a category. Many say they lack the knowledge to create traditional entertainment. The survey also highlights a disconnect between how the C-suite views impact entertainment vs. the rest of an organization. Lastly, the survey also reveals a challenge in narrowing the “purpose gap,” where brands pay lip service to issues of the day without having an authentic connection to the areas in which they are trying to create impact.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.

An online survey of more than 500 marketers, conducted by The Harris Poll for Participant Media and SoulPancake, in partnership with Brand Storytelling, reveals an increasing interest by companies to invest in the growing category of impact entertainment, whereby storytellers use traditional entertainment vehicles such as feature films, documentaries, episodic television, and shorts to raise awareness about a pressing social issue and, ideally, generate meaningful positive impact for that cause. While historically the realm of Hollywood and socially conscious filmmakers, more corporations and brands are interested in investing in impact entertainment, especially as more consumers demand companies be “good citizens” instead of remaining silent on major societal issues such as racial equity, economic inequality, climate change, and more. All survey participants were executives holding manager-level or higher roles at companies with revenue of at least \$10 million.

“We need to find more inventive and disruptive ways to bring consumers in. While traditional advertising will drive awareness, more entertainment-driven work will get people to fall

in love with [our brands],” says Bill Roden, General Mills’ creative director, who put out an open call to Hollywood last year asking for the industry’s help in coming up with entertainment ideas that both incorporated the company’s 41 brand characters and expressed its core brand values. “Creating a really great feature film, with an important message of empowerment and positivity that aligns with the trends and zeitgeist out there, is a genuine way for us to bring people into the brand in a new way on platforms where there is no advertising.”

But the survey, along with qualitative interviews with impact entertainment producers and top marketers such as Roden, revealed significant challenges to creating and sustaining this initiative at companies where traditional advertising still holds most of the power—in both creative mission and funding. Those challenges are led by a “purpose gap” as well as a “skills gap” that must be solved quickly if impact entertainment is to grow in the future.

The “purpose gap” is the distance—and sometimes disconnect—between the brand’s motivation to invest in impact entertainment and the onus to measure and generate real, positive change relating to that area of impact. Do marketers truly want to positively impact the issue they are focusing on, or are their measures of success still steeped in traditional expectations from advertising, such as brand awareness, driving sales, and revenue? The survey revealed that marketers were still focused

MORE THAN

**60%**

believe brand awareness is the most significant factor of success

LESS THAN

**40%**

believe “positive measured change in the issue” is a factor of success

on traditional measurements for a new category that will require deeper and profoundly different commitments by corporations. More than 60 percent of respondents said brand awareness was the most significant success factor, while less than 40 percent responded that “positive measured change in the issue” was a success factor, a more than 20 percentage point difference. To be successful in this new category, brands will need to transform what they expect from their investment, particularly as consumers become even more focused on spending money with brands that are truly “good citizens.”

This “purpose gap” was called out by Unilever CEO Alan Jope in an open letter delivered during the 2019 Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity. Jope wrote: “Green-washing, purpose-washing, cause-washing, ‘woke’-washing. It’s beginning to infect our industry. It’s polluting purpose. We’ve all seen it, and we know it when we see it. It’s putting in peril the very thing which offers us the opportunity to help tackle many of the world’s issues and, in doing so, to build our brands.”

“Purpose has become a wildly overused word,” says Shabnam Mogharabi, co-founder and general manager of SoulPancake, a division of Participant Media. “Companies are well aware that consumers today expect them to lead. To speak up and leverage their resources to make progress on key issues. Unfortunately, if those efforts do not resonate as thoughtful, committed, and long-term, then the work can backfire. It takes real effort and time to find the right version and vision of ‘purpose’ for a brand.”

When it comes to investing in and creating impact entertainment, executives are also struggling with a “skills gap.” Sixty-four percent of respondents said finding quality creative partners was a challenge. Fifty-four percent said there was limited understanding of what impact and traditional entertainment really are at their companies, and 53 percent said they lacked the knowledge on how to start an impact entertainment initiative at their company.

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**Green-washing,  
purpose-washing,  
cause-washing,  
‘woke’-washing.**

**It’s beginning to infect  
our industry.**

**It’s polluting purpose.**

—ALAN JOPE CEO @ Unilever

Closing this “skills gap” will be critical as brands consider shifting some of their focus and budgets from traditional advertising to impact entertainment. Some companies, like Nike, are finding ways of working with creative partners who are adept at moving from advertising to impact. An agile creative partner in Los Angeles production company Dirty Robber was key to Nike’s decision to invest in the creation of *Breaking2*, a Cannes Lions award-winning documentary about the men who sought to break the two-hour marathon barrier during a closed race.

Unfortunately, the impetus for impact entertainment happens at the highest levels inside of companies and sometimes in single conversations that don’t include the rest of the organization. This illuminates the final challenge uncovered in the survey: the seeming disconnect between the C-suite and less senior creative and marketing team members about the overall importance of impact entertainment.

While 86 percent of C-suite respondents (which made up one quarter of total respondents), showed great enthusiasm for impact entertainment and supported increasing funding over the next three years, a sizable 58 percent of total respondents said a key challenge was the difficulty in convincing C-suite executives to make investments. Notably, 45 percent of the C-suite said they will spend more

on impact entertainment in the next three years, while only 36 percent of all respondents said they would spend more. Moreover, while a majority of respondents believed in the importance of impact entertainment as a way to change the world for the better, C-suite respondents were much more optimistic about its power to break through with consumers and have a positive impact on the issues facing the world today.

This disconnect could be as simple as a lack of communication between the C-suite and the rest of an organization. However, it could also signal a deeper divide within companies of the power of impact entertainment to make a difference both with audiences and the issue—and whether companies are ready to stand up for issues in far more public ways than they have in the past.

“The trouble is that most advertisers and their agencies are risk-averse,” says Rupert Maconick, founder of Saville Productions, who has worked on impact entertainment programs with Johnson & Johnson and NetScout. “What you need [in order] to create this type of work is a forward-thinking CMO and an agency that has to get out of the way of itself.”

For companies, marketers, and agencies willing to work through these challenges, the rewards both in

advancing the issue and raising brand awareness can be sizable. By investing brand marketing resources into traditional entertainment formats, Johnson & Johnson, Airbnb, and Dick’s Sporting Goods have all successfully used impact entertainment to change perceptions of nurses, highlight racial and gender bias, and increase spending on youth sports (see [Case Studies](#)). Company executives at General Mills and HP say impact entertainment breaks through to consumers in ways other forms of advertising cannot, while also giving brands access to new distribution channels such as streaming services and film festivals. Such access is becoming critical for advertisers searching for new ways to reach consumers beyond traditional ad-supported publishers and social media platforms, especially as traditional television, cable, and movie viewing habits change.

Notably, a majority of those surveyed say there is a business case to invest in impact entertainment: 87 percent of C-suite respondents say they believe their brand values are more important than quarterly financials. As a result, three out of four C-suite members say they are comfortable investing in impact entertainment, with 86 percent of the C-suite respondents noting they plan to increase or maintain impact entertainment spending over the next three years. Almost half (45 percent) say they plan to spend more on impact entertainment. •

**86%**

of C-SUITE RESPONDENTS showed great enthusiasm for impact entertainment and its ability to drive brand value

**45%**

of C-SUITE RESPONDENTS said they would spend more on impact entertainment in the next 3 years

**58%**

of TOTAL RESPONDENTS believe a key challenge to growing impact entertainment is in convincing C-Suite execs to make investments

**36%**

of TOTAL RESPONDENTS said they would spend more on impact entertainment in the next 3 years



## WHAT RESPONDENTS BELIEVE, BY THE NUMBERS

**85%**

believe being perceived as indifferent to society's struggles is hurting brand performance

**86%**

believe impact entertainment can reinforce their brand values

**81%**

believe that activism through entertainment has the ability to change the world for the better

**85%**

believe that it engages with consumers in a meaningful way

**72%**

believe it is riskier to stay silent than to stand up for your beliefs as a corporation

**85%**

believe impact entertainment can help brands break through the noise of traditional media

**87%**

of the **C-SUITE RESPONDENTS** believe their brand values are more important than quarterly financials

**38%**

believe "positive measured change for the issue" is a key success measurement

### METHODOLOGY

"The Rise of Impact Entertainment" survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Participant Media and SoulPancake, in partnership with Brand Storytelling, for two weeks in May 2019. The 515 creative & marketing professionals surveyed represent a cross-category sample of brands. All participants were manager-level or higher at companies with annual revenue of at least \$10 million. Nearly a quarter of the respondents belonged to the C-suite in those organizations. Participants worked in the marketing, CSR/PR communications, and/or content + creative departments within their companies. The online survey is not based on a probability sample; therefore, no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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When you can make audiences  
empathize  
with something  
they initially felt  
wasn't relatable,  
that's the first step  
toward change.

—**DON CHEADLE** Academy Award®-nominated Actor,  
Film Producer, Director + Writer

# THE RISE OF IMPACT ENTERTAINMENT.

For decades, corporations and brands have likened speaking up on societal issues to putting a target on one's back. Fears that consumers would see them as too controversial or as overstepping dominated corporate culture. Rupert Maconick, founder of Saville Productions, who has worked to create content for brands like Johnson & Johnson and NetScout, says corporations are traditionally risk-averse—and with good reason. As recently as 2015, Target faced consumer backlash when it offered gender-neutral bathrooms to support LGBTQ+ rights. In 2013, a Cheerios commercial featuring a multi-racial family elicited so many racist responses that Cheerios closed comments on the video.

Corporations have always sought brand-safe spaces to present their advertising, eschewing even placing their traditional ad messages near hard news for fear of blowback from so-called “bad news.” Brands often chose not to divulge their positions on topics such as race, climate change, or gender equity, and if they did advocate on any of these issues, it was primarily through their philanthropic foundations or corporate sustainability efforts, where there was still a degree of separation from their core brand and marketing budgets.

But that was then. And the world now is a very different one.

## ***indifference is no longer a business model.***

Today, more corporations are realizing that they must take a more active and vocal role in society, to not just be seen as a “good citizen” but in fact to be a “good citizen.” The results of a May 2019 survey conducted by The Harris Poll, on behalf of Participant Media and SoulPancake, in partnership

with Brand Storytelling, echo this with 95 percent of respondents saying it is very or somewhat important for their brands to be “good citizens” advocating for issues that the company believes in. Cheerios, for its part, refused to back down from the backlash against its 2013 campaign, with a marketing executive quoted in publications as saying “there are many families, and we celebrate them all.”

Companies such as Airbnb have taken a clear stance on race, gender, and immigration both in traditional advertising and, most recently, in traditional entertainment. Airbnb premiered its first feature-length documentary *Gay Chorus Deep South* at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2019. The film followed the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus on a trip through the American South to spread a message of love, inclusion, and diversity, and ended up winning the documentary audience award at the festival.

There are no references to Airbnb in the film; the logo doesn't appear on screen, and the chorus doesn't stay in Airbnb homes. Audiences would only know they are watching a film funded by the brand if they see the subtle “An Airbnb Production” credit or recognize that one of the listed executive producers happens to be the company's head of content. This documentary experiment is a key example of impact entertainment and how different it is from “purpose-driven” advertising. By definition, traditional entertainment does not allow for heavy integration of brands, nor the tight creative control that exists when shooting commercials. In traditional

## 95%

believe it is very or somewhat important for their brands to be “good citizens” advocating for issues that the company believes in

advertising, the brand is paramount. In impact entertainment, the issue plays the top role, and the brand or corporation often play the role of financier.

This financial support marries the focus on purpose with the growing interest by brands to invest in traditional entertainment, such as films, documentaries, and TV series, as non-disruptive ways to capture consumer attention in an increasingly fractured media landscape. By doing so, brands and their marketers are demonstrating leadership in issue areas that matter to consumers who increasingly seek out companies that are purpose-driven, not simply profit-driven.

The survey results support this viewpoint. Ninety-two percent of respondents articulated a consumer-driven goal of building both profit and purpose. Consumers want to support brands and companies that share their positions on societal issues. They vote with their purchasing power for companies they perceive are doing good in the world versus competitors who may not have a similar mission. This has led to an acknowledgement by company executives that staying silent on these issues is in fact more dangerous than being controversial. Moreover, marketers say global challenges such as climate change, income inequality, racial tension, and acceptance of LGBTQ+ citizens are so important that they must step up, support, and advocate for these issues in ways that go beyond their traditional philanthropic efforts.

“Consumers expect brands to be the ones doing good things in the world,” says Ryan Eckel, vice president of strategy and innovation at Dick’s Sporting Goods. “The biggest risk of a brand is becoming irrelevant, so having something meaningful to say about issues that are important to stakeholders and consumers is a pathway to relevance. But it has to drive back to why you exist

**92%**

of **TOTAL RESPONDENTS** articulated a consumer-driven goal of building both profit + purpose through their impact work

**72%**

believe it is riskier to stay silent than to stand up for your beliefs as a company

**85%**

believe being perceived as indifferent to societal struggles will hurt brand performance

**87%**

of **C-SUITE RESPONDENTS** agree that brand values are more important than quarterly results

**75%**

of **TOTAL RESPONDENTS** agree that brand values are more important than quarterly results

as a company. We believe in youth sports at our core and in funding youth sports because kids need clean, safe places to play. That message is core to our business and rings true to our consumers.”

Eckel’s sentiments were mirrored by the survey results, which revealed that 72 percent of respondents believe it is riskier today to stay silent than to stand up for their beliefs as a company. Eighty-five percent say being perceived as indifferent to societal struggles will hurt brand performance. A significant majority of respondents, 87 percent of C-suite and 75 percent of total respondents, agreed that brand values—which can be aligned with broader values of importance in society—are more important than quarterly results.

Indeed, marketers—particularly those executives sitting in the C-suite—believe that they have the opportunity to change the world for the better through impact entertainment. Eighty-eight percent of C-suite respondents say companies have the power to bring visibility to invisible issues. Eighty-one percent of the C-suite respondents believe that activism through entertainment has the ability to change the world for the better.

Making visible the invisible was one of the driving forces behind Johnson & Johnson’s investment in the documentary *5B*. The film chronicles the efforts of nurses and caregivers at San Francisco General Hospital to create the world’s first HIV ward, changing the way patients were treated during the 1980s AIDS epidemic. *The Los Angeles Times* reviewed the film, which received the Entertainment Lions Grand Prix at Cannes in June 2019, noting that

it is as inspiring as it is unsettling with “its heroic stories of hospital staffers and allies who fought ignorance, fear, bigotry, and political wrangling to protect the rights and integrity of AIDS patients.”

“We were trying to change the perception of nursing,” says Brendan Gaul, chief content officer at UM Studios, the agency that oversaw production of the film, which was co-directed by Oscar nominee Dan Krauss and Oscar winner Paul Haggis. “J&J had been supporting frontline health workers through traditional channels for many years. We saw the creation of a powerful film as a better way to influence culture. Nurses are often portrayed as compromised characters, lacking technical expertise, as the love interest of doctors, or simply in the background. In fact, nurses are on the front lines of healthcare. They are innovative and resourceful.”

J&J used the tactics of Hollywood, creating a feature-length documentary, to present a thoughtful and more nuanced portrayal of nurses and caregivers than what could be achieved in a traditional 60-second advertisement. While J&J only had one credit at the end of the film for financing and commissioning the project, Gaul says the film demonstrates how impact entertainment can be used in tandem with traditional marketing. The company is running branded content pieces across the iHeart radio network with DJs talking about nursing and AIDS, highlighting J&J’s participation in both of those communities. “We can address the healthcare professionals and LGBTQ+ communities in a more targeted way. This film helps us go beyond the story explored in 5B, revealing our broader commitment to these communities.” Gaul’s sentiment matches a majority of C-suite respondents in the survey with 86 percent of them responding that impact entertainment reinforces a brand’s core values.

Valuing purpose over profit naturally leads to increased intent in pursuing impact entertainment as well as an increase in spending by some companies in both impact and traditional entertainment. In fact, seven out of 10 CEOs support investment in impact entertainment, and 74 percent of the C-suite say there is also a strong business case for it.

A sizeable minority of respondents, 46 percent, said they already have a dedicated budget for impact

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We saw

the creation of a

powerful film

as a better way

to influence

culture.

—BRENDAN GAUL CCO @ UM Studios

entertainment. Thirty-five percent of those surveyed said they also had dedicated budgets for traditional entertainment. The survey also revealed an intent to increase spending on impact entertainment in the next three years, with 45 percent of the C-suite respondents in the affirmative.

With dedicated budgets and some looking to increase those expenditures, survey respondents also revealed what their impact entertainment might look like in the future, such as documentaries or television series and who they would partner with for impact entertainment. However, particularly in the area of media forms and partners, there was a distinct disconnect between the C-suite respondents versus non C-suite respondents.

Almost half of the C-suite respondents, 49 percent, said they are interested in producing content with an entertainment studio, while only 40 percent of the total were interested in working with studios. A much smaller subset of the C-suite respondents had any sense of what kind of entertainment they wanted to make, with documentaries winning out (19 percent), followed by television or episodic series (18 percent), feature films (16 percent), and podcasts (12 percent). Responses from non-C-suite participants skewed even lower.

Bill Roden, creative director at General Mills, says the key point for him is “going wherever people are getting stories on these new formats,” noting

that for General Mills this means everything from music and gaming platforms, such as Spotify and Twitch, to animated shorts and television series.

However, many respondents would still prefer to produce media forms that are faster, easier, and cheaper to create than documentaries, feature films, or television series as a way to highlight their company's focus on social issues. Forty percent of respondents said they were most interested in exploring their purpose and impact work by creating social content, followed closely by branded content (35 percent), traditional impact campaigns (30 percent), educational materials (27 percent), live events (25 percent), short-form content (20 percent), and products and merchandise (16 percent).

While printing company HP has produced a fictional digital series and a feature-length film in the past, Angela Matusik, HP's head of brand journalism, is focusing on short-form documentaries that can serve multiple marketing purposes across the company. The *History of Memory* series, which debuted at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2019, highlights the power of printed images, while telling stories of love, mystery, and discovery. Matusik says that in a global company with 50,000 employees, there is a large demand for content both internally and externally. "We have all of these engines that need to be filled, especially our social media platforms, and our needs are primarily short-form."

### ***charting a course for impact.***

Bringing a brand's power (and its financial weight) to bear on highlighting and perhaps even positively affecting the world's social problems is clearly of growing importance to marketers. But the survey and executive interviews also revealed deep challenges to creating and sustaining impact entertainment within organizations.

Key lessons can be learned from companies who are pioneers in the space that can help others begin their own impact entertainment initiatives. At this year's Cannes Lions, Participant Media CEO David Linde shed light on some of their key principles for successful impact work, stressing: "Social impact is a

**49%**

of the **C-SUITE RESPONDENTS** are interested in working with entertainment studios

**40%**

of the **TOTAL RESPONDENTS** are interested in working with entertainment studios

team sport. It doesn't exist only with Participant; it exists with the filmmakers, with the artists, and the impact organizations that we work with. Ultimately, what we're trying to achieve is a cultural shift to accelerate the work that the impact organizations are doing at any given time."

While the survey revealed that some companies are forward-leaning with impact entertainment, a significant number of respondents (43 percent) said that their companies still avoided risky or controversial issues. Thirty-four percent noted that they didn't want to be seen as supporting issues that were inauthentic to the brand, a point Unilever CEO Alan Jope highlighted in an open letter he issued to the industry last month. As Eckel of Dick's Sporting Goods succinctly points out, it's important to choose issues that a company can truly support because they are at the core of company values. Maconick of Saville Productions agrees, noting "there is nothing worse than a brand saying they are something when they aren't."

There are also significant challenges in identifying where this type of purpose-driven capability sits inside of companies, which according to the survey, still depend primarily on traditional methods of supporting or advocating for social issues that are important to them. Sixty-three percent of respondents said their companies support nonprofits or charitable organizations, and 50 percent said the company offered financial support through fundraising or donations. Those budgets may need to be reconsidered as companies shift their focus from what has been "quiet" philanthropic actions to making bold statements through impact entertainment on social issues as Johnson & Johnson and Airbnb have done recently.

## ENTERTAINMENT FORMATS BY INTEREST.

C-SUITE RESPONDENTS

**19%**

Documentaries

**18%**

Television +  
Episodic Series

**16%**

Feature  
Films

**12%**

Podcasts

## TYPES OF CONTENT BY INTEREST.

TOTAL RESPONDENTS

**40%**

Social

**35%**

Branded Content

**30%**

Traditional  
Impact  
Campaigns

**27%**

Educational  
Materials

**25%**

Live Events

**20%**

Short-Form  
Content

**16%**

Products +  
Merchandise

## TOP ISSUE AREAS OF INTEREST.

**#1**

Disaster Relief

**#2**

Social Justice

**#3**

Equity

**#4**

Arts + Culture

**#5**

Wellness

**#6**

Diversity

**#7**

Inclusion

**#8**

Poverty

**#9**

Food Security

**90%**

of TOTAL RESPONDENTS  
listed wellness, diversity,  
inclusion, poverty, + food  
security as top priorities

For J&J, financially supporting the documentary 5B meant working with its existing media buying budgets. General Mills' Bill Roden says he is considering many options for how to financially support the work he wants to do following his 10 months of talking with Hollywood. "We have been considering where this sits in our company. Do we create a new [entertainment] division?," he says. "I could see this eventually being a line extension for us. We know we need to find new ways to work with creators that are different from how we operate today."

Creating a throughline from impact entertainment to traditional marketing will be critical for many companies so that impact entertainment doesn't come off as "one-off" projects—either internally or externally—that cannot be mapped back to a company's success metrics.

This need for integration may be the reason most survey respondents say that in order to effectively create impact entertainment, they are primarily turning to either their media and creative agencies (55 percent) or internal teams and studios (52 percent), compared to using external production companies or entertainment studios (both 40 percent). Notably, access to Hollywood was a very low priority for respondents (only 6 percent) when asked about priorities for partnership. Top priorities were the quality of creative (34 percent), built-in social activations (21 percent), and access to distribution or an audience (12 percent).

These priorities correspond directly with the outcomes (beyond being seen as a "good citizen") that respondents rated highly. Companies and their executives know they must still target their audiences (55 percent) and, more importantly, connect with influencers who will share and talk about the impact entertainment. Three out of four respondents said that whatever they produce as a part of an impact entertainment strategy must also connect with talent and influencers in order to engage audiences in the most effective way.

Those priorities are revealed in subsequent interviews with marketing executives. None of them consider impact entertainment as a stand-alone investment, noting there has to be significant traditional advertising, social campaigns, and public relations programs strategically aligned with the impact entertainment to make it worth the investment.

The considerations necessary to make impact entertainment successful are revealed in the challenges respondents said they would have to overcome to move forward with an impact entertainment strategy. Limited time and resources (68 percent), finding quality creative partners (64 percent), developing the content and creative strategy (62 percent), and difficulty aligning on the issues that connect with constituents (62 percent) were the top four challenges listed.

What seems to be most evident, despite the challenges, is that the rise of the impact entertainment category and its potential for growth in the future will be largely driven by the C-suite and its appetite and interest in the space. Eighty-five percent of C-suite respondents agreed that impact entertainment engages with consumers, brands, and causes in meaningful ways, compared to 77 percent of total respondents.

What is also clear from this slight disconnect is that there is room for conversations between the C-suite and the rest of the company on why impact entertainment may be a way forward as companies decide to speak up about the biggest issues facing the world today as a way to differentiate in an increasingly commoditized world.

As Gaul of UM Studios says: "So much of it comes down to having an insightful, courageous client, who will see opportunities differently. It is having decision-makers who recognize the power of storytelling." •

“

**We know we need**

**to find new ways to work with**

**creators that are different**

**from how we operate today.**

—BILL RODEN Creative Director @ General Mills



## WHO BRANDS CURRENTLY WORK WITH.

**55%**

Creative + Media  
Agencies

**52%**

Internal Teams +  
Studios

**40%**

External  
Production  
Companies

**40%**

Entertainment  
Studios

## TOP PRIORITIES FOR CREATIVE PARTNERS.

**34%**

Quality of  
Creative

**21%**

Built-In Social  
Activations

**12%**

Access to  
Distribution or  
Audience

**6%**

Access to  
Hollywood

## THE CHALLENGES.

**68%**

Limited Time +  
Resources

**64%**

Finding Quality  
Creative Partners

**62%**

Developing  
the Content +  
Creative Strategy

**62%**

Difficulty  
Aligning on the  
Right Issues

“

We need our tools of  
empathy +  
imagination  
more now than  
any other time.

—**T. MICHELLE MURPHY** Professional Content Creator +  
Communications Strategist

**CASE STUDIES.**

# NURSES FIRST.

JOHNSON & JOHNSON  
5B



## ENTERTAINMENT FORMAT + STATUS

Feature-length documentary, currently in distribution via Verizon Media

To conceive, create, and distribute the documentary *5B*, which tells the story of nurses who changed the way AIDS patients were treated in the 1980s, Johnson & Johnson brought together several heavyweight players, including Oscar-nominee Dan Krauss and Oscar-winner Paul Haggis, who co-directed the film, and Saville Productions, which has produced other brand-funded entertainment, including Werner Herzog's film *Lo and Behold* in partnership with NetScout. J&J leaned heavily on the studio arm of its media buying agency, UM, to ascertain how the film should be funded and distributed. Eventually, *5B* won an Entertainment Lions Grand Prix Award at Cannes and was sold to Verizon Media for theatrical release through its RYOT division.

For J&J, whose name appears only once in the final credits, the complex two-year partnership may seem like a lot of work for little brand awareness. But the goal of *5B* wasn't to put the brand front and center, says Brendan Gaul, chief creative officer of UM Studios. It was to solve a business challenge: How can J&J change the way nursing is perceived?

"This starts way upstream in business planning," Gaul says. "We ask who are the audiences we need to reach, and what are the ways to do it? Then we ask, can we solve the business challenge through premium original content?" In this case, Gaul says, a film allowed for targeted outreach to nurses, as well as to LGBTQ+ communities.

Johnson & Johnson



## IMPACT AREAS OF FOCUS

Healthcare, Nursing, LGBTQ+

Making certain that its media-buying agency was involved throughout the process also solved a key funding issue. By redeploying media dollars to support storytelling instead of ads, J&J found a new way of reaching audiences as finding audiences through traditional ad-supported networks continues to become more difficult. Gaul says traditional advertising will always have a role to play, citing the fact that the nurses featured in the film inspired a vignette for a traditional TV spot, *Nurses Change Lives*.

"I think of this as a continuum. On the far right is advertising and what the brand *needs* to say. In the middle is branded content, and on the far left is the audience-first story," Gaul says. "What is the story built for the audience that the brand can bring forward? That's the secret. It's about finding a story that is compelling from an entertainment standpoint where the brand has permission to bring that narrative forward." •

"

This starts

way upstream in

business

planning.

—BRENDAN GAUL CCO @ UM Studios

# ABOUT BELONGING.



## AIRBNB

*Gay Chorus Deep South*



### ENTERTAINMENT FORMAT + STATUS

Feature-length documentary, currently in the festival circuit + seeking distribution



### IMPACT AREAS OF FOCUS

Belonging, Equity, LGBTQ+

The Airbnb corporate brand has always taken a backseat to the stories of its travelers and hosts in the company's marketing strategy. But it is also always in complete creative control, even with its first feature-length documentary *Gay Chorus Deep South*, which tracks a road trip taken by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus through the American South.

"The brand rarely speaks," says James Goode, Airbnb's head of creative, who also served as an executive producer on the film, noting that there is no reference to Airbnb in the film. "We're very clear on what our central mission is. We aim to create a world where anybody can belong anywhere. Fundamentally, [this film] was a pure straightforward expression of our mission. Three hundred gay men going on the classic road trip... to go somewhere where they knew they wouldn't belong and spread a message of love, inclusion, and diversity."

Creating a feature documentary that would take more than two years to produce wasn't going to be easy. Yet Goode didn't cede creative control to an external production team. Instead, he turned to his in-house studio, including a young director, David Charles Rodrigues, who was already working as a freelancer for Airbnb. Rodrigues' only experience was one previous documentary, but Goode wanted to work with diverse, up-and-coming talent. "We didn't need someone with a long track record. We are confident in our own decision-making."

Goode points out that by keeping the production in-house, Airbnb was able to mitigate the expenses of its first documentary venture. He already had a production studio capable of doing five-minute short docs. So he decided to leverage their creative skills to make a feature. "It didn't require a huge investment," he says. "But it does take a leap of faith. We were embarking on something where we didn't know what the end was going to be. But the process was as important as the outcome."

The leap of faith paid off: When *Gay Chorus Deep South* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2019, it won the coveted Audience Award, which Goode is particularly proud of. "It's not about whether the sound was great or the direction was great. What's important is impact with the audience," he says.

Now, Goode feels his team has the capability, capacity, and confidence to do other long-form film work, including navigating the complicated distribution process. "It was a prototype that minimized our risk, and we learned new skills," Goode says.

Just as important to Goode was Airbnb's ability to maintain creative direction. "We are the creative guardians of the brand, and that's what differentiates us," he says. •

# A RUN OF FAITH.

**NIKE**

*Breaking2*



## ENTERTAINMENT FORMAT + STATUS

Feature-length documentary, currently airing digitally on National Geographic



## IMPACT AREAS OF FOCUS

Belonging, Equity, LGBTQ+

Nike's *Breaking2* shares the story of three runners as they attempt to break the two-hour barrier for the marathon. "The initial thought was simply to make commercials to advertise the attempt and then figure out a way to dramatize the livestreamed event," says *Breaking2* director Martin Desmond Roe, a partner at Dirty Robber, a production company that has long worked with the athletic brand. "But as [the project] unfolded in front of me and the main internal creative executive at Nike, both of us saw that if I was going to shoot all the commercials, we would be halfway to shooting an amazing documentary."

Roe says the story about the men and the struggles they overcome to run in countries such as Eritrea, which has been wracked by civil war and is now a closed nation much like North Korea, was ultimately more fascinating than them breaking the two-hour barrier. Their stories ultimately revealed their passion and love for the sport of running, a passion that has created a bridge between them and runners around the world.

Nike agreed, and Roe headed back to Africa, becoming part of the first non-news crew to shoot in Eritrea, home of runner Zersenay Tadese. "It was the adventure of a lifetime," Roe says. He also insisted on a critical shift of retaining final editorial oversight, which allowed the film broader distribution.

Ultimately, National Geographic came on as the film's distribution partner.

This ensured the film was more than a two-hour commercial. It was the opportunity to tell the story of three men and their passion for running despite all odds. "If what we want is to truly express the majesty of this experience and spark people's imaginations, I couldn't shoot it like a commercial," Roe says. "Zersenay let me in the room the day of the race because we had spent weeks together in his home in Eritrea. That wouldn't have happened on a commercial shoot where there would have been 30 people in the room saying, 'that's not the right shade of green' or something."

The focus on story and character first, not brand messaging, was a shift for Nike. For Nike executives, Roe says it was a leap of faith to move from the original commercial intent to making a feature-length documentary. One that paid off when the film won a Cannes Lions award last year.

In the end, the decision seemed prescient, as none of the three men broke the two-hour challenge. "It's the most glorious failure," Roe says. But the story of how the men got to the track that day made the live event a must-watch spectacle for Nike, and the film, which reveals the universal love of running, has been viewed more than 5 million times on YouTube. •

# HELP US, HOLLYWOOD.



## GENERAL MILLS

*Work With The Monsters*



### ENTERTAINMENT FORMAT + STATUS

Character- and values-based film and television, still in exploratory stages

Bill Roden wasn't even working at General Mills when he proposed the idea of extending the power of characters such as Buzz the Bee and Count Chocula beyond cereal boxes and 30-second television ads to full-length feature films or television series in the vein of other successful IP-based franchises like *Toy Story* or *The LEGO Movie*. He was interviewing for the job of creative director with CMO Ivan Pollard and Chief Brand Officer Brad Hiranaga, when he said to them, "I don't know why we don't have [movies] out there," he said. "We have this whole world—41 characters—who have receptivity, awareness, and affinity with our consumers."

When he landed the job, he put out an open call to Hollywood, taking out billboards on Sunset Boulevard and running articles in trade publications like *Variety* asking filmmakers if they wanted to come and "work with the monsters," referring to characters like the Count Chocula and Frankenberry.

But the goal isn't to make monster movies. Roden sees opportunities for many of the company's characters to spark entertainment franchises that also celebrate each brand's values—kindness and goodness for the Cheerios brand and its Buzz the Bee mascot, or imagination and curiosity in kids for the Lucky Charms brand and its main hero, Lucky the Leprechaun. What he does know for sure: He wants to work with Hollywood.

That tradition is not new. Back in the 1960s, General Mills worked with the cartoon studio Hanna-Barbera to fund the creation of characters like Rocky & Bullwinkle.



### IMPACT AREAS OF FOCUS

Empowering Kids, Kindness

"We traded media for content," Roden says. The company's traditional television ads would run in time slots during the cartoons with the Hanna-Barbera characters pulling in the right audience for the cereals being advertised. For its funding of the creative, General Mills not only gained access to an audience but also to the creativity of Hollywood. That is what Roden hopes to revive with his call for help from Hollywood.

"We are definitely looking at taking the backseat. While we retain our intellectual property, we are open to working with creators to make work that they know is right," he says. "Ideally we want to create work that consumers seek out versus work that interrupts or annoys. It doesn't always have to be about selling something at every single turn."

Along with the creative expertise, Roden says he's becoming well-versed in the different ways to fund a move into the entertainment space. "We have all received a master's class in Hollywood," Roden says. There's merchandising, syndication, producer bonuses, working with financiers, funding the creative development, negotiating distribution, locking in talent, and making money on the back end if the project gets sold. As for his desire to break into Hollywood, the venture may still have to wait: Roden hasn't yet landed on the best ways to fund projects and is continuing to work on how to structure and set up the process and team internally. •

# AT FIRST SHOT.

**HP**

*History of Memory*



## ENTERTAINMENT FORMAT + STATUS

Docu-short series, currently airing via online platforms

The power of letting storytellers do their jobs comes through in HP's *History of Memory* series, a project that, while smaller in terms of budget and length than other traditional entertainment projects, is equally as powerful in its impact.

Each episode tracks the story behind a printed photograph, the importance they hold in people's lives, and the memories—sometimes painful—that they capture. It would have been easy to allow HP's brand to take a primary role in the series, but HP director of brand journalism Angela Matusik knew such overt branding would never resonate with audiences. "Part of the challenge is to trust the makers to create the film in a pure way," she says, especially if broad distribution is the goal. "You have to allow the filmmakers to do what they do best without giving them brand criteria."

Instead of giving them a brief or an RFP to answer, Matusik gave filmmakers Sarah Klein and Tom Mason of RedGlass Pictures free rein to tell the stories the way they wanted. This freedom to create is evident in the topics they were able to cover—topics that many brands would shy away from. Matusik worked directly with the filmmakers through their production company, eschewing ad agencies so that she could be involved from ideation through filming. The small team meant smaller budgets, and the films were created to be more evergreen than specific to any one advertising campaign.



## IMPACT AREAS OF FOCUS

Race, Adoption, Culture

The result are episodes that feel like independent documentary shorts. In one episode, *The Secret Album*, the viewer is immediately brought into a mystery. The narrator, Gail Lukasik, says, "If your family has been in this country for a long time, there are secrets in your closet that you don't know about. That's my family's story."

The film chronicles Lukasik's journey to discover her true family story and the new memories made along the way. "Suddenly now I have another family. Seeing my mother in them and them in my mother, it's incredible."

Such emotional storytelling has hit home with audiences. *History of Memory* was selected as a finalist for the Tribeca X Festival earlier this year, which showcases films supported by corporations, and was shown a second time by demand at the Tribeca Film Festival. It won the Tribeca X award for best episodic series.

The success has meant Matusik has had to think of distribution beyond its traditional digital placements on HP's website and social media channels. She's also thinking a lot about how to use this type of storytelling going forward. "The films are helping us with discussions internally about our brand's goals and how we may have an even greater impact through storytelling next year," she says. •



# KINGS OF THE WIDE SCREEN.



## DICK'S SPORTING GOODS *We Could Be King*



### ENTERTAINMENT FORMAT + STATUS

Web series, TV special, and feature-length documentary, currently in major distribution



### IMPACT AREAS OF FOCUS

School Sports, Funding Education, Race

In 2013, Dick's Sporting Goods produced a web series called *Hell Week* about high school football preseason training camps. "We had no idea if it would be any good," says Ryan Eckel, the company's vice president of strategy and innovation. "But once we saw it, we thought it felt really fresh."

The team put it on YouTube, which might have been the end of an early experiment in storytelling, but Eckel showed it to ESPN saying, "We think this could be a 30-minute show." ESPN agreed, and this allowed Dick's Sporting Goods to produce the show.

The next big step, producing a feature-length documentary film, meant seeking out help and creativity beyond its own walls. "We wanted to craft a great film because if it's not great, no one is going to watch it," Eckel says. "We didn't want our brand in the film, but we didn't think we would be taken seriously if we took the idea directly to directors."

Instead, Eckel and his team briefed Tribeca Digital Studios (producer of the Tribeca Film Festival) on finding a powerful story of the importance of youth sports. "We asked them to go out and find a school that had been defunded or was on the brink of being defunded," Eckel says. The result is *We Could Be King*, which tells the story of what happened when Germantown High School is shutdown and the students are forced to join the football team of their former rivals, Martin Luther King High School.

Eckel admits that working with a production company meant giving up the control brand marketers are used to. "When we shoot a commercial, we are on set giving notes to the director—probably more than the director would want us to," he says. "Here, you get the first edit back, you haven't seen any footage, and now you get to see just two hours."

While a different process, Eckel says it is one that works well both for credibility and budgets. Eckel says producing *We Could Be King* was no more expensive than creating a 60-second television ad. As he talked to Tribeca about budgets, he realized, "I could keep doing 20 television spots a year, or I could do 19 TV spots and do one documentary and see what happens." So what happened? A lot: An Emmy Award, distribution on ABC, ESPN, and Netflix, and a firm understanding of how stories can draw audiences to brands. •

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**We wanted to craft  
a great film because  
if it's not great,  
no one [will] watch it.**

—RYAN ECKEL VP @ Dick's Sporting Goods

# ABOUT US.



## PARTICIPANT MEDIA.

Founded by Jeff Skoll, [Participant Media](#) combines the power of a good story, well told, with real world impact and awareness around today's most vital issues. Through its worldwide network of traditional and digital distribution, along with partnerships with key non-profit and NGO organizations, Participant speaks directly to the rise of today's conscious consumer, representing the well over 2 billion consumers compelled to make meaningful content a priority focus. Participant has earned 73 Academy Award® nominations and 18 wins, including Best Picture for *Spotlight* and *Green Book*, and Best Foreign Language Film for *Roma* and *A Fantastic Woman*.



## SOULPANCAKE.

SoulPancake, a division of Participant Media, is a content studio that celebrates human connection and provides hope to audiences through storytelling across digital platforms, television & OTT, live events, and branded entertainment. One of Fast Company's "Most Innovative Companies in Video," SoulPancake has more than 1 billion video views across its digital platforms and has won 16 Webby Awards, four Streamy Awards, and two Emmys. SoulPancake has worked with global brands and media partners such as AARP, Allstate, Coca-Cola, GE, Google, Microsoft, Panera, Sprint, T-Mobile, Visa, and more. Find us online at [soulpancake.com](http://soulpancake.com) or on social platforms via @soulpancake.



## BRAND STORYTELLING.

Brand Storytelling is a B2B media company serving the burgeoning business of brand-funded content creation and distribution. The company is driven by the belief that a new era of media + marketing is rapidly emerging, one empowered by technology and driven by creative storytelling. Events include the highly popular Brand Storytelling, a sanctioned event of the Sundance Film Festival, and Elevate, the summer retreat for brand marketers and their content partners. Both events are held annually in Park City, Utah. Visit Brand Storytelling online at [BrandStorytelling.tv](http://BrandStorytelling.tv) to learn more.



## THE AUTHOR.

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