

# The Experience Audit: Optimizing Virtual, Live and Hybrid Events

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By Ben Moorsom, Benan Demir PhD



## How do you keep making successful events, be it virtual, live or a hybrid?

**A** year into the world of virtual events, you may already be familiar with many of the best practices – like the integration of scene setting, robust visuals, interactivity and the critical importance of presenter coaching. With in-person or ‘live’ events on the horizon, now more than ever, internal event planners, external agencies and production companies are planning for what’s next.

We know that people are constantly asking you to do more and continue raising the bar. Pushing the status

quo is probably in the DNA of your organization. That said, it isn’t necessarily about doing more. It’s about achieving ‘better’ with what you already deliver and continuing to innovate through participant insights.

This is where the value of an experience audit can take you beyond ‘great’ to ‘ever better’ through identifying and addressing the cognitive challenges or threats to the attendee experience. After experiencing an incredibly swift transition from in-person to online events, we are now able to innovate and thrive in the rapidly changing and increasingly digital environment of today’s meetings and events. Where we used to look at the individual stimuli and touchpoints of a physical event environment, we now include landing pages, video formats, speaker and voice coaching and more in the virtual world. With any event, we only get one chance to get an experience right, and taking an informed perspective lets us continually optimize and improve our current and future events.

## Identifying cognitive challenges for attendees

You've probably done post-event surveys to gauge the effectiveness of your meetings and events, live and virtual. You've asked about the keynote, each presentation, the environment or platform and navigation. Probably, also how they liked the yoga, cocktail reception, photo gallery and workshops.

But have you asked about their barriers to learning, ability to focus or biases?

Have you analyzed group dynamics or created differentiated cognitive zones?

Do your events contain an appropriate creative thread or other device to guide participants through your content or story, relieving their cognitive load? And have you truly investigated the difference between engaging a live attendee that has now become an online viewer?

Continually doing 'better' can be as straightforward as uncovering potential cognitive challenges or threats that may be preventing attendees from interacting meaningfully with your brand and content at your virtual, live and hybrid events.

An 'experience audit' is about viewing events through a neuroscience lens to uncover insights to help you better connect with participants and optimize your return on investment (ROI).

But when we think of getting a return on our investment, most people think of engagement. Many people would say that the higher the audience engagement, the better, but the word "engagement" is simply an overused term for the audience experience. It's more than just stimulating cheers or jeers from a crowd. It's a measure of retention and attention, and using multiple variables, it determines message sustainability. The reality is that the audience experience is much more refined than the word "engagement" lets on.

## Curating the Experience

When conducting an experience audit it's important to deconstruct engagement into smaller parts. This enables us to get a more in-depth look at each touchpoint in the audience journey.

At Debut, we use seven key "lenses" when we look at an experience. Each lens is based on underlying fields of scientific research that impact our daily lives, both personally and in business.

The seven Neuroscaping® lenses:

- 1. Group Dynamics** - How we interact in group settings, changes based on context, group composition & cohesiveness; familiarity
- 2. Attention** - Our ability to focus and the effort required to pay attention and ignore distractions
- 3. Mood** - A semi-stable state of positivity/negativity that affects our thoughts and behaviors
- 4. Cognitive Processes & Biases (CPB)** - Known biases or mechanisms of information processing, persuasion and belief formation
- 5. Cognitive Load** - Sensory and working memory load; the amount of information our brain needs to process at one time
- 6. Fatigue** - Cognitive fatigue is a negative, mood-like state that seriously impairs our cognitive abilities
- 7. Retention** - Memory for information and experiences; a unique version of events that is often distorted; true "ROI"



## We can use these lenses to look at any kind of event experience

### Virtual

For example, consider the **Cognitive Processes & Biases** that are at work in our events. According to Robert Cialdini's *Principles of Social Influence* (1984), we use a number of simple mental shortcuts when deciding who we will listen to. In fact, we are more likely to listen to those with authority, like experts in a field or people we like, such as a familiar late-night television host. In online events, it's important to have a host the audience can recognize and build rapport with – it makes the entire experience more enjoyable. We want our audience to watch like it's the *The Tonight Show*, versus a presidential debate.



This saves their mental energy for the content, instead of being a critic. Assessing a speaker's credibility is a low-effort and relatively reliable judgement an audience can make – it enables them to believe a trusted source without having to put much work into thinking about it.



### Live

Any experience, like a delicious food or fine wine, is best when shared. Unfortunately, when people come together they often create an unavoidable byproduct – **NOISE!** Noise is something often overlooked in an experience, but when you stop and think about it, it's one of the main reasons people end up leaving a live event space. Noise leaves us feeling **Fatigued** like when we flee the dance floor in a club for a cool drink at the bar. Noise also causes stress which is known to affect our brain chemistry, impairing memory and putting us in a negative mood.

And it's also important to consider **Group Dynamics**. Off-tasking has been shown to affect all nearby audience members (Sona, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013), reducing immersion and retention. So, whether it's the boisterous sound of voices in a nearby group, or the bright tablet screen in the 1st row – it only takes one person to throw the whole group off. This group psychology naturally takes place in person, but online it also applies when audiences are sharing two-way video, when presenters are 'live' from different locations, or when live chat is used and it divides our attention.

Because distraction is contagious, we need to plan to mitigate it in advance, engineering environments, providing headphones, creating quiet spaces and using soft materials to absorb echo, as well as movement choreography and planning for group size and proximity to others.

### Hybrid

People have just become used to the breaking down of content into shorter segments and/or stretching it out over longer periods of time. Going forward, people will expect the virtual aspects of experiences to which they have become accustomed, from shorter live presentations and pre-recorded sessions, to learning-on-demand and online networking and chat. A hybrid experience, such as an in-person event accompanied by an online content portal, should always be structured to use online and offline mediums to their greatest potential.

This is an excellent opportunity to think about the minds of the attendees, overloaded with content from a jam-packed live event agenda. Attendees should be able to turn to web offerings to catch up on anything they missed, as well as additional learning – leading

to better Retention. We remember information better when it is spaced out over days, rather than shared all at once. Our working memory is limited, and we can only transfer so much to our long-term memory at one time. So, hybridizing content is an effective way to space it out. By using the web or secure intranet sites in the days before and after an event we can make a traditional event more cognitively ergonomic.

## Doing better without having to do more: The Experience Audit Journey

The experience audit is a journey that looks at all areas of your event – and it's certainly something we should all do more often. It enables a better understanding of the user experience and the event ecosystem, **uncovering potential cognitive challenges or threats that may be preventing attendees from interacting meaningfully with your brand and content.**

For years, Debut's robust team of PhD researchers and specialists in experience design have helped leading companies unlock greater value hidden in their experiences through:

- Defining key objectives and experiential touchpoints for audit.
- Evaluation of the current state of design factors, both virtually and on-site.



- Deep understanding of the user experience.
- Identifying, analyzing and synthesizing new insights and observations.
- Identifying cognitive challenges or threats in attendee experience.
- Identifying Neuroscaping™ opportunities to optimize events, achieve objectives and maximize the attendee's experience.

Don't waste that one chance with your audience.

If you truly want to optimize the attendee experience, don't focus on doing more, focus on doing better. By removing barriers and leveraging insights in event design you can ease the cognitive load of your audience, so they get more of your content. An experience audit makes the most out of your hard work, planning and investment.



[www.debutgroup.com](http://www.debutgroup.com)

## About Ben Moorsom

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Ben is the creator of Neuroscaping®. A behavioral communications practice. Since founding the Debut Group in 1997, Ben has made it his mission to challenge and disrupt ineffective conventions of business communications, pioneering new approaches that strengthen brands internally, engage people more effectively and deeply capture their attention. By applying advances from psychology and neuroscience, Ben and his team turn audiences into active participants. They use Neuroscaping methodology to cut through the noise and competition at the gateway to the human mind, placing business messages near the front of the line. Ben is a frequent keynote speaker and co-conspirator at global conferences on communication thought leadership.

## About Benan Demir PhD

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Benan has a BA Media Studies and Entertainment Technology from the University of Portsmouth, UK, Graduated from Masters in Cognitive Systems and Interactive Media in Pompeu Fabra University, Spain. Continued her PhD. In Brain, Mind and Computer Science at University of Padova, Italy. Benan has worked as a cognitive scientist and advanced tech research lead for leading companies over the past 8 years... Dedicating her work to improving technologies while focusing on the human brain and human emotions.

## About Neuroscaping®

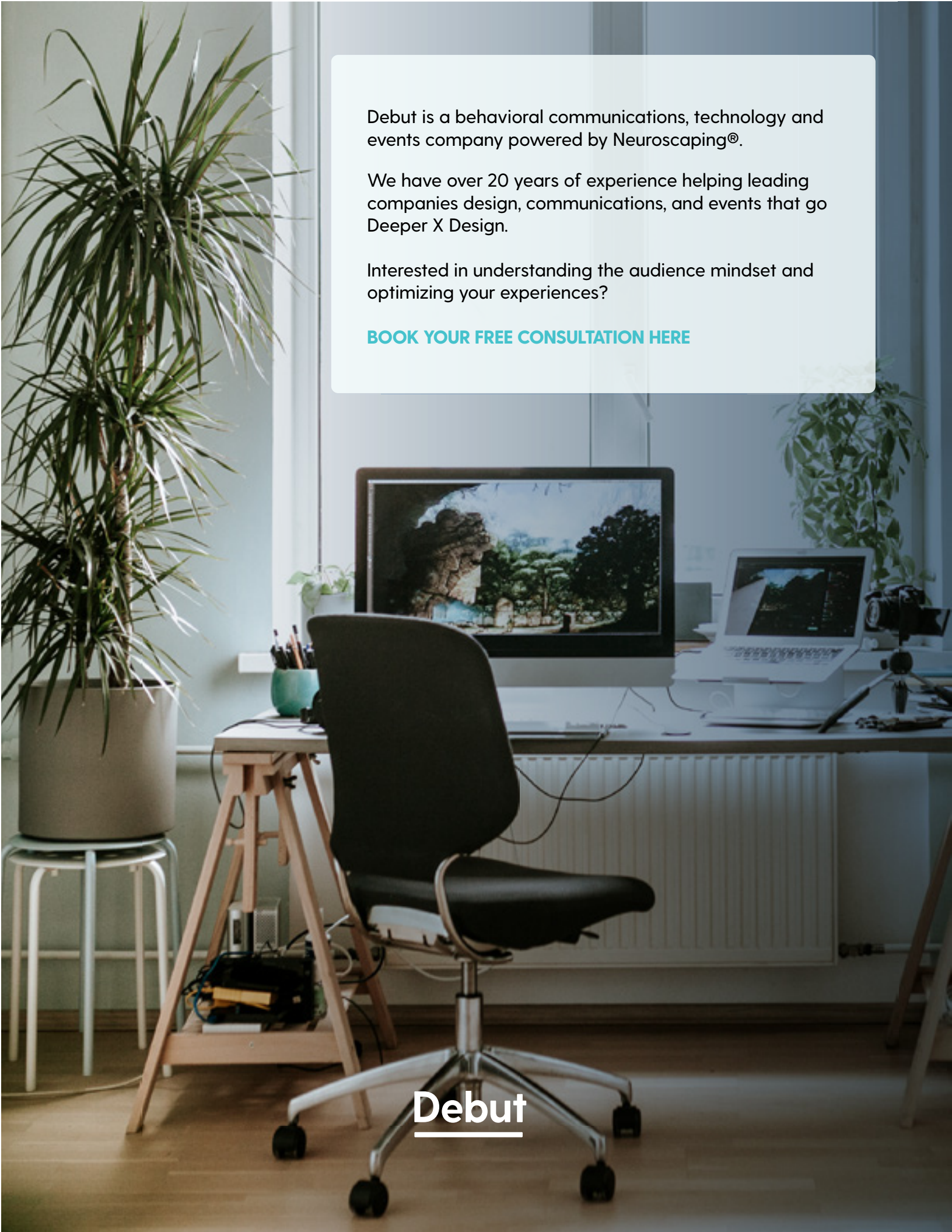
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Neuroscaping® empowers and enables companies to forge stronger connections with their audiences.

Neuroscaping® is the behavioral insight engine that informs the design communications and experiences. Deconstructing what we perceive as “engagement” into behavioral lenses. Harnessing research from the fields of neuroscience, cognitive psychology, social psychology and data science and beyond - to drive better engagement outcomes.

By approaching design decisions to better align with how people truly think, feel, and act, we can improve an individual's internal state leading to greater satisfaction and retention of messaging. People take more in and have a better experience. This process of Neuroscaping® allows Debut to go deeper by design. Reducing “guesswork” and creating with intent.

Debut manages the largest AI-powered knowledge-base of engagement insights to help guide communication and experiential design for companies that require progressive engagement products and services.



Debut is a behavioral communications, technology and events company powered by Neuroscaping®.

We have over 20 years of experience helping leading companies design, communications, and events that go Deeper X Design.

Interested in understanding the audience mindset and optimizing your experiences?

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