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# ACES 2026

## TRENDS REPORT

 ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR BRANDS AND EXHIBITORS

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# 1 OVERVIEW



## THE EVOLUTION OF CES CONTINUES TO ACCELERATE AT AN ALARMING RATE.

The show frequently experiences rapid changes, creating a turbulent backdrop for brands seeking to achieve their goals. This report is designed to provide clarity for experiential marketing professionals who want smarter strategies, better ROI, and more meaningful connections from their CES activations.

Use this guide to transform your experiential strategy for CES and beyond. By applying the insights and strategies inside, you can show up smarter and close the gap between impact and investment.

Every January, the world's top tech brands flood Las Vegas, taking over the city and rewriting audience expectations in real time. CES 2026 demonstrated that brands aren't afraid to take big swings. Still, many major players pulled back their spectacle-driven booth experiences in favor of private events, controlled experiences, and PR-driven activations.

# BY THE NUMBERS, CES 2026 TELLS AN UNEXPECTED STORY:

	CES 2025	CES 2026
TOTAL ATTENDEES	142,465	↑ 148,000
EXHIBITORS	4,500+	↓ 4,100+
INTERNATIONAL ATTENDEES	57,401	↓ 55,000
SENIOR BUYER ATTENDEES	53%	↑ 55%
MEDIA ATTENDEES	6,500	↑ 6,900



Attendance grew. Exhibitor count dropped. International presence dipped. Media interest rose. The show was both better attended and spread more thin, an early signal that the ground beneath CES is shifting.

*\*CES 2026 metrics are pre-audit and subject to change*



# 2 FIRST-TIMER POV



## FROM MORIAH MARTIN, ENVIRONMENTS DESIGNER, DERSE

This was my first time attending CES, and I'm genuinely grateful I had the chance to experience it, alongside my Derse team members. Being surrounded by the level of global creativity and innovation that CES has to offer was energizing and a little overwhelming in the best way.

Walking the floor, I quickly realized how much booth design shapes emotional response. The spaces that pulled me in didn't rely on spectacle alone. They felt open, intuitive, and human. You didn't have to think about where to go next. You just flowed.

One of my favorite examples was Waymo. Their booth used an open layout with a strong central anchor that naturally drew people in and encouraged exploration. It felt transparent, approachable, and confident. With AI and automation accelerating so quickly, people are raising real questions and quiet skepticism. Architecture can either amplify that tension or ease it. When a space feels transparent, it signals honesty and accessibility. When it feels closed off, it creates distance.

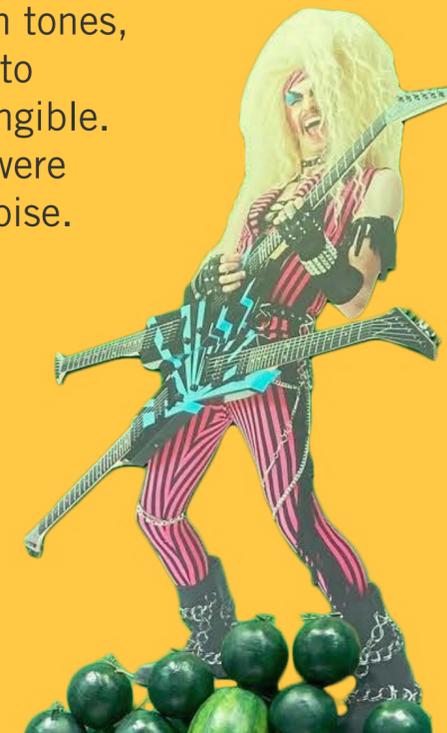




My favorite exhibits made an intentional point to show how their product could benefit people's lives. Bosch was a success in this regard. Their booth felt like a modern home showroom. Light wood floors, warm tones, and intentional pops of color drew attention to how their products fit into everyday life. The live cooking demos made the technology instantly tangible. In contrast, some spaces leaned too hard into novelty. Dancing robots were fun for a moment, but without a practical story, they quickly became noise.



Overall, I saw some truly beautiful spaces at CES, but I also left wanting more. Right now, it feels like many companies are racing to attach themselves to AI without fully thinking through the message. Looking forward, I think the new standard will be transparency, practicality, and responsiveness. The best experiences will show how technology fits into real lives, invite honest questions, with design spaces that encourage open dialogue.



The more you Bosch,  
the more you feel like a Bosch



Release your  
inner Bosch

VitaFresh® pro keeps food fresh longer  
Quality built to last, inside  
Dual compressors, dual cooling

# 3 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

## FROM CONCEPTUAL TO PRACTICAL

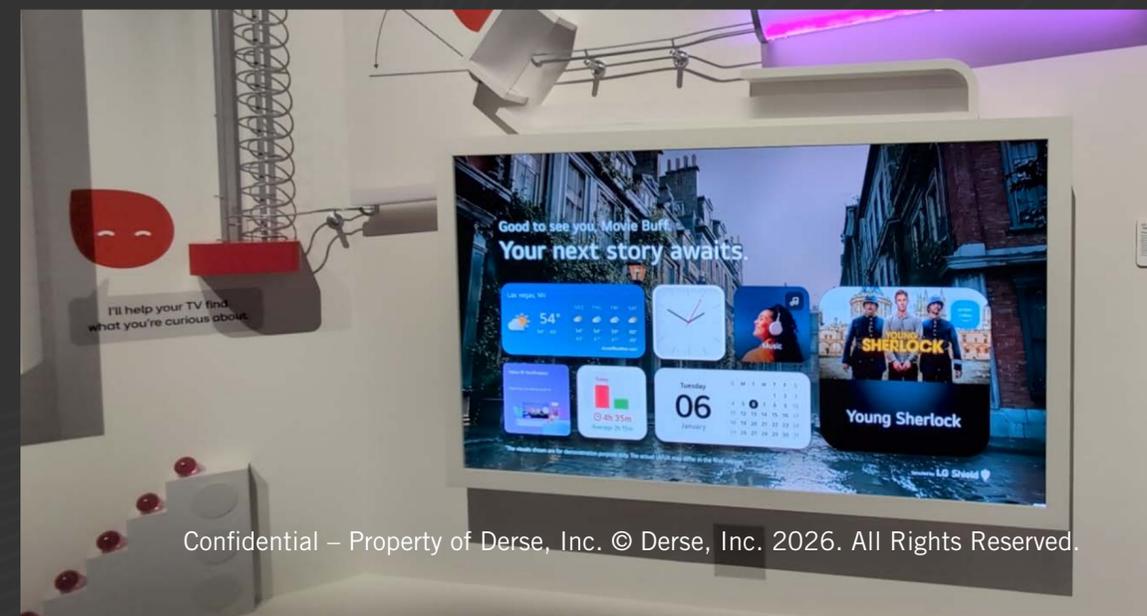
Artificial intelligence reached a turning point at CES 2026, shifting from speculative hype to tangible, functional implementation. Rather than treating AI as a buzzword, exhibitors used hands-on activations to demonstrate how AI works and why it matters. The most compelling executions weren't shiny gadgets; they were explanatory engines, co-creation tools, and practical problem solvers, revealing AI's value through tactile, narrative-driven experiences.

## AI AS A STORYTELLING ENGINE FROM DATA TO DECISION: LG'S AI RUBE GOLDBERG EXPERIENCE

LG delivered the clearest translation of AI into physical space. Their hybrid activation demonstrated how their AI-enabled products transform your data and preferences into a tailored product experience. The Rube Goldberg machine journey showed:

- What the AI ingests (your stated preferences)
- How it processes information (through animated "logic pathways")
- How it outputs recommendations (tailored content based on your selections)

The experience made AI visible, charming, and surprisingly human.





## AI FOR EXPERIENTIAL IMMERSION: THE MERCY MOVIE ACTIVATION

A radically different take on AI storytelling. Built inside the AI Pavilion guests were immersed in their own true crime story:

1. Each attendee's face was scanned to provide data for the generative AI
2. Seated in an automated "interrogation chair"
3. Presented with deepfake evidence of a crime they "committed"
4. Tasked with clearing their name using voice commands

It was a visceral, cinematic demonstration of AI's ethical gray areas and a clever way to turn entertainment into an awareness campaign.



## AI FOR GENERATIVE CO-CREATION: AMAZON WEB SERVICES F1 TRACK GENERATOR

Guests drew their own racetrack on a touchscreen. AI instantly converted the sketch into a fully drivable 3D course, in which attendees could race in a simulator. It was fast, fun, personal, and impossible to execute without generative AI—an ideal case study of additive value.

## ACTIONABLE INSIGHT

AI enhances your experience when it:

1. Enables something impossible or impractical through traditional methods
2. Demonstrates real-world utility and benefit
3. Offers personalization with purpose

# 4 SUSTAINABILITY

## FROM OPTICS TO INTEGRATION

Sustainability at CES 2026 showed how superficial messaging can't compete with integrated, system-level storytelling. While some exhibitors remained performative, the leaders demonstrated sustainability as a function of design, not a marketing tagline.

## PANASONIC LEADS THE CATEGORY

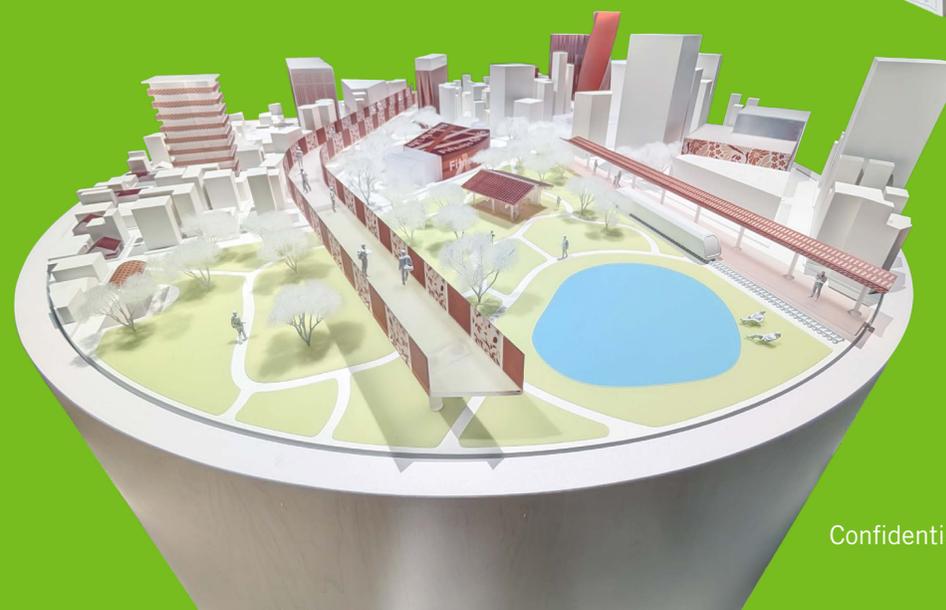
Carrying forward momentum from 2025, Panasonic again delivered the most cohesive, credible, and immersive sustainability experience. Their “The Future We Make” campaign showcased:

- Solar-integrated leaf panels designed for windows and urban architecture
- A full city-scale diorama illustrating grid-level renewable energy planning
- Co-creation via a MAKE sculpture, where attendees signed their sustainability commitments

Panasonic didn't just talk about sustainability—they showed how it works and where it fits.

## ACTIONABLE INSIGHT

Demonstrate practical application and invite co-creation. The future of sustainability storytelling is not aspirational; it's participatory.



# EXPERIENCE DESIGN

## THE STRATEGY PARADOX

Experience design at CES 2026 was defined by a striking paradox. Brands approached the attendee journey through two entirely opposed strategies:

### 1. THE TIGHT, CHOREOGRAPHED, CONTROLLED MODEL

These premium spaces required reservations, proof of invite, or long queues. They featured:

- Controlled entry with immersive theater experience
- Linear attendee journey through the environment
- VIP access tiers, scheduled entry times, or queues

Brands like Samsung, Hyundai, Panasonic, and AARP favored this strategy. It reduced crowds, introduced intentional friction, and generated FOMO.

### 2. THE OPEN, FREE-FLOW EXPLORATION

At the other extreme, open-plan environments embraced accessibility and transparency. These booths fostered:

- Casual browsing
- High foot traffic
- Lower threshold for engagement
- Broad visibility

This model offered ease of access but sacrificed narrative control. Waymo, TCL, and RCA exemplified the open free-flow approach. The show floor reflected this duality: freedom vs. curation, openness vs. exclusivity, volume vs. value.





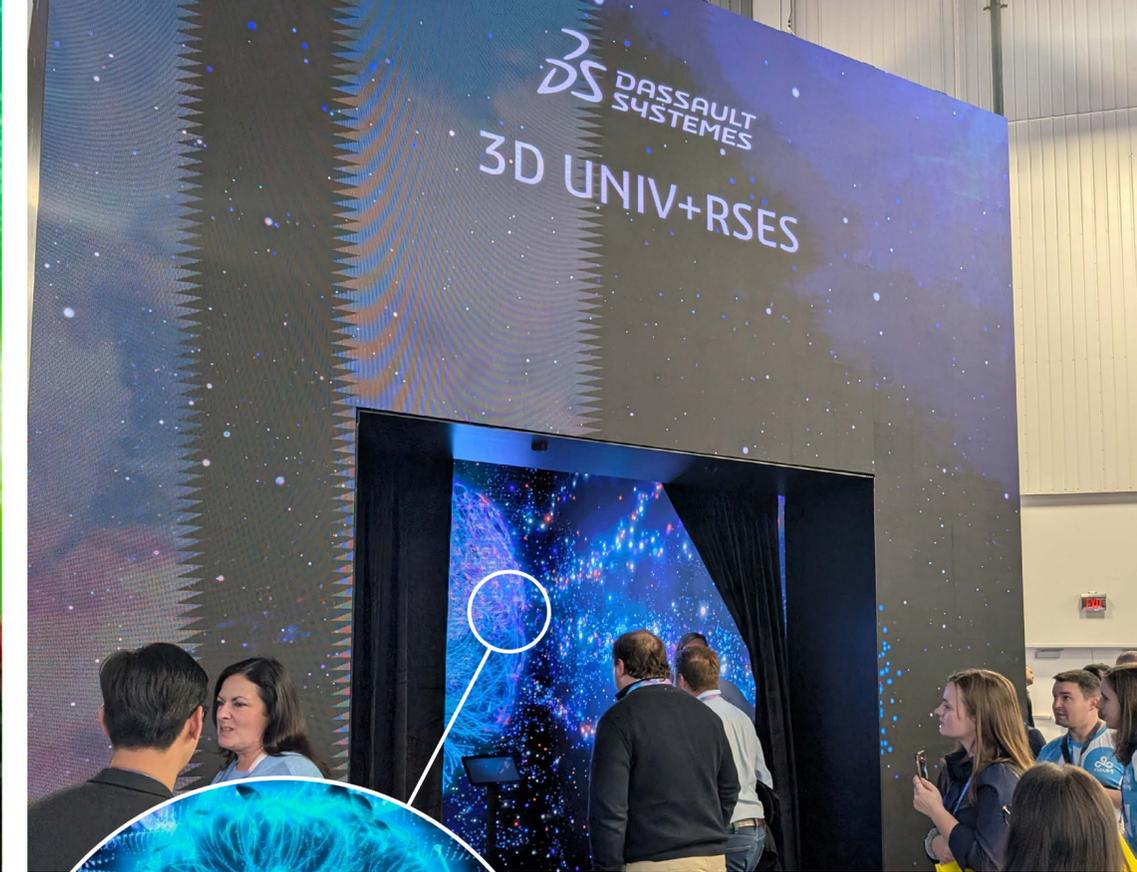
# FLASH TO FOMO

With multiple major brands abandoning the show floor entirely (Samsung, SK Hynix, Sony Entertainment), CES 2026 marked a dramatic shift in how companies think about presence. Off-site activations offered environmental control and exclusivity, but at the cost of less organic foot traffic and reach.

- SK Hynix abandoned its iconic central-hall presence for a highly targeted meeting room experience
- Samsung moved entirely off-site to a private, more intimate venue
- Sony Entertainment disappeared from the floor
- Many automotive and robotics companies built fully gated, appointment-only spaces

This shift signals that some exhibitors are prioritizing quality over quantity, optimizing for strategic meetings, in-depth demos, and controlled brand narratives rather than broad exposure. The brands that adopted this model traded reach for resonance.



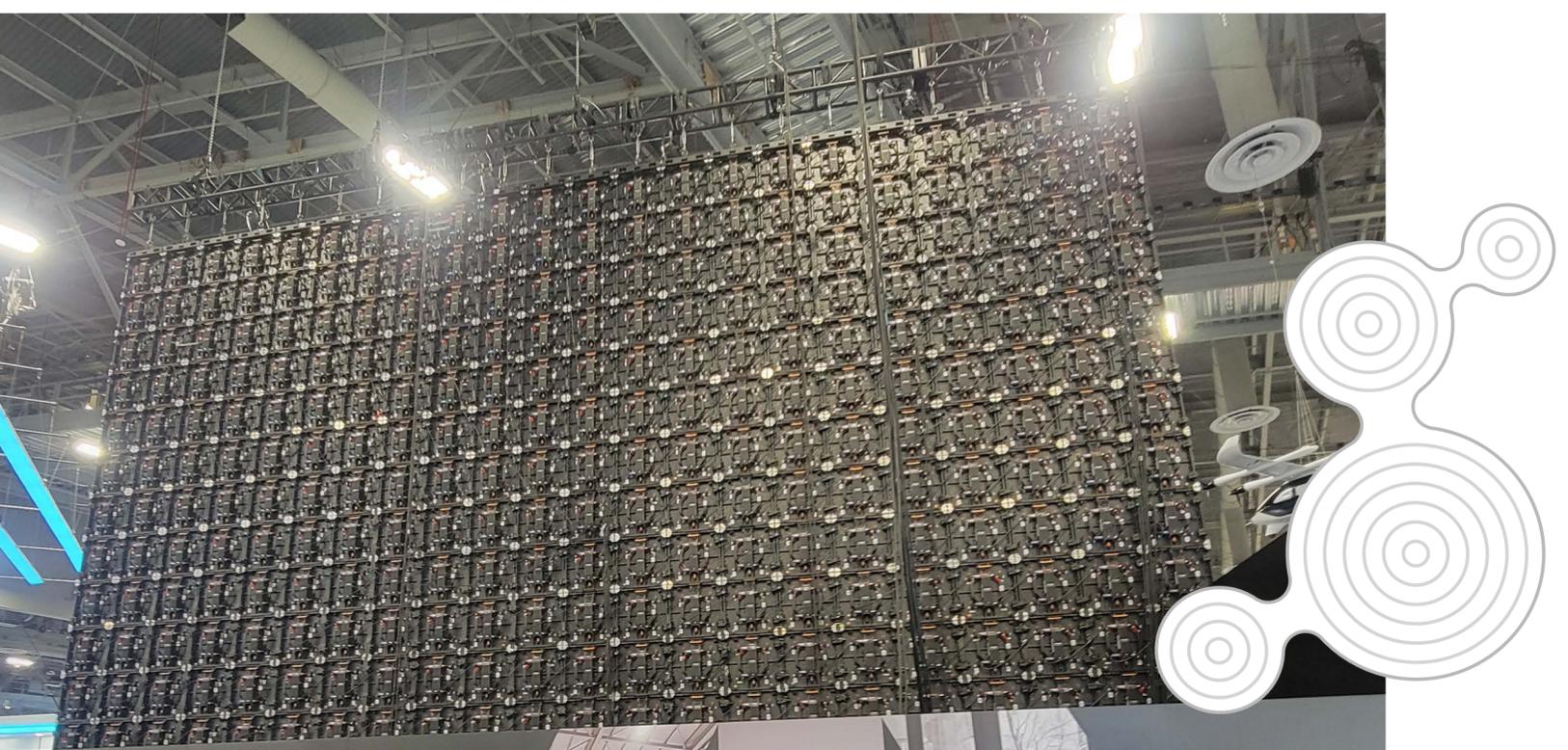


## IMMERSION THEATER

Immersion theaters became an experiential backbone for many brands because they solved an increasingly painful problem: cognitive overload. By pulling attendees into a darkened, cinematic environment, before entering the rest of the booth these theaters:

- Reset attention
- Established narrative context
- Elevated emotional stakes
- Created a shared understanding
- Controlled timing and pacing

Panasonic and Dassault Systems executed this exceptionally well, bringing theme-park-level story design to the show floor.



## PRODUCT DEMONSTRATIONS & SIMULATORS

In a landscape saturated with claims of innovation, the booths that rose above the noise were the ones that prioritized comprehension over spectacle.

### WHAT WORKED

- John Deere’s digital/physical harvest pipeline
- LG’s AI Rube Goldberg interactive
- Virtual simulators that provided a “see for yourself” understanding

These demos were successful because they clarified and proved the value proposition.

### WHAT DIDN’T WORK

Broken robots, understocked interactives, and non-functional touchpoints were widespread this year. TCL’s sustainability jewelry station repeatedly ran out of materials, leaving visitors confused. Several robotics exhibitors displayed machines that either malfunctioned or lacked any real purpose. The message was clear: **If it doesn’t work, it shouldn’t be on the floor.**

## ACTIONABLE INSIGHT

Try to strike a balance between exclusivity and accessibility. Use tactics like reservations or invite-only moments to elevate high-value interactions, but pair them with open, self-guided zones so you don’t lose organic reach. Anchor the experience with an immersion theater or scripted entry to establish context, then support it with product demos that clearly show value and function.

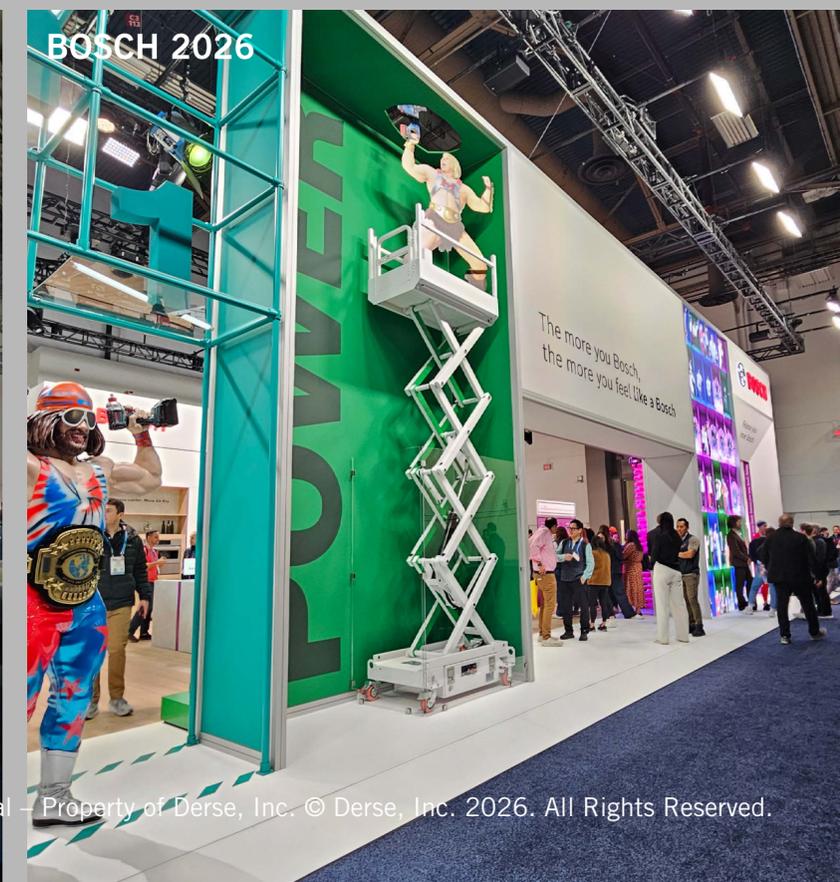
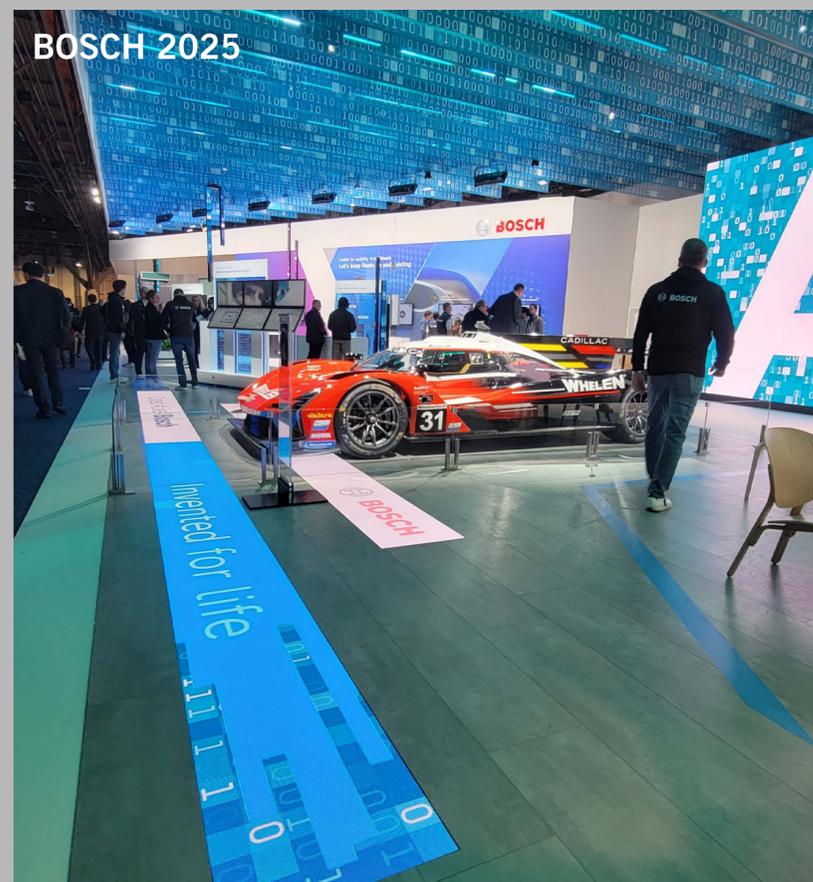
# BOOTH DESIGN

## A RETURN TO FUNCTION, MATERIALITY, AND CLARITY

Booth design at CES 2026 reflected the broader transition from concept to practicality. The trend leaned heavily toward industrial, tactile, hardware-oriented design principles. This shift aligns with the broader industry trend toward robotics, software-defined electric mobility, and the practical application of AI. Exhibitors used the functional design of their booth space to amplify their messaging about the utility of their products and services.

## INDUSTRIAL AESTHETICS REIGNED SUPREME

Metal, mesh, plywood, exposed fasteners, printed concrete, and transparent LED screens were everywhere. Brands intentionally leaned into a “working-lab” aesthetic that aligned with the robotics boom and AI’s shift into physical devices.





## MINIMALISM OUTPACED SPECTACLE

Architecture made room for experience. Many of the exhibits featured an open floor plan, favoring exploration and curiosity. Attendees found the extra space to roam a welcome change compared to the restrictive and crowded spaces of the past; with more freedom and mobility, the show felt easier to navigate. Keep in mind, this may be an indication of lower on-site investment.



## PRODUCTS WERE THE HERO

Open floor plans made room for a more dramatic presentation of products. The best exhibits made their featured product the focal point of their space with the use of dramatic lighting, negative space, and clearly defined zones.



## MATERIAL LAYERING ADDED REFINEMENT

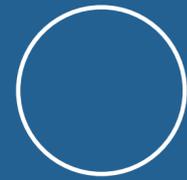
One of the most notable booth design tactics was layering. Exhibitors encouraged attendees to feel for themselves by using overlapping materials, printed textures, and lighting techniques to create subtle depth without adding bulk or runaway cost. The use of layering created spaces that felt lived-in and refined.



# CONCLUSION

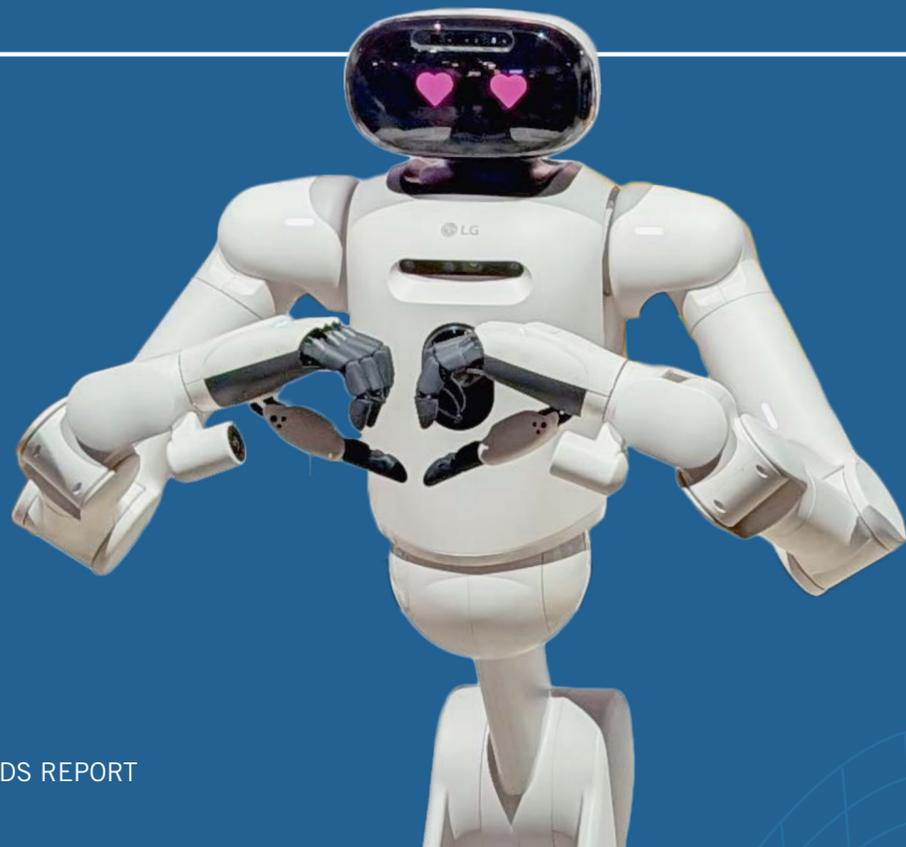
CES 2026 will be remembered not for its spectacle but for its strategic realignment. The show floor felt caught between eras: part open-access tech carnival, part gated innovation summit, part PR-driven media showcase. Exhibitors experimented in real time, recalibrating their presence, rethinking their investment strategy, and often redefining what “showing up at CES” means.

This variability may be a reflection of broader geopolitical and economic uncertainty. Changes in trade conditions, ongoing supply chain considerations, and evolving international priorities could be shaping exhibitor decisions.



Even amid these shifts, clear patterns emerged. Brands that succeeded leaned into intentionality: choreographed journeys over spectacle, immersion over noise, working demos over flashy concepts, and honest, industrial materials over high-gloss futurism.

The main takeaway is simple: CES is evolving, and so must the brands that participate. Scale no longer signals success. Clarity, credibility, and purposeful experience design are the peek into the future of tech that attendees crave.



# 8 KEY TAKEAWAYS

## 1. SPECTACLE ISN'T A DIFFERENTIATOR

Audiences have grown less impressed by towering structures and flashy displays but more drawn to clarity, authenticity, and usability.

## 2. TIGHT NARRATIVES ARE THE NEW POWER MOVE

The rise of carefully curated experiences shows that brands are shifting from media impressions alone to meaningful dialogue with engaged audiences.

## 3. SHOW DON'T TELL

Visitors want understanding, not gimmicks. If a product demo doesn't deepen comprehension, it doesn't belong.

## 4. AI NEEDS HUMANITY

The best AI demonstrations were about practical application and made the invisible visible and the complex approachable.

## 5. MATERIAL HONESTY BUILDS TRUST

Industrial, tactile, and layered design communicates transparency and credibility, attributes that attendees increasingly crave.



## READY TO EXHIBIT WITH CONFIDENCE?

Just like this report, we translate complexity into clarity, build experiences that cut through the fog, and deliver the strategy and execution CES demands.

# CONTRIBUTORS



## BRIAN CICCO

*Customer Experience  
Creative Director*

Brian joined Derse in 2006 and has extensive experience developing creative solutions for trade show exhibits and branded environments. He specializes in leading integrated exhibit and event programs and brings a wide range of creative skills to the table, including seed idea brainstorming as well as content development, storytelling, and script writing. Notable clients Brian has partnered with includes Gilead, AbbVie, GE HealthCare, and Hologic.



## JOE DEZZUTTI

*Creative Director*

Joe joined Derse in 2016 and has more than 15 years of experience in environment design. He has extensive experience designing with the purpose of achieving client objectives and driving results. Some notable clients he has partnered with include Hologic, Regeneron, Samsung, Aramco, and Taylor Farms.



## DONOVAN HOGAN

*Content Strategist*

Donovan joined Derse in 2024 and has more than a decade of experience in content marketing. His diverse expertise is applied by creating dynamic insights and strategies for Derse's internal and external communications. His pedigree includes such clients as Frito-Lay, PepsiCo, Qdoba, and Johnsonville Sausage.



## MORIAH MARTIN

*Environments Designer*

Moriah joined Derse in 2025 after earning her bachelor's degree in industrial design. As a recent addition to the team, she brings a fresh perspective, approaching each project with empathy and a focus on delivering audience-centric marketing environments. Since joining Derse, she has designed exhibits and environments across multiple industries, including finance, healthcare, transportation, and tech.

