

**PASSION FOR PEOPLE**  
**MAKING A CONTRIBUTION TO THE QUALITY OF LIFE**  
**THROUGH MEANINGFUL AND COMPELLING EXPERIECES**

*Reporting on developments in Europe with the European Centre for the Experience Economy by Anna Snel, Thomas Thijssen en Albert Boswijk*

*The European Centre for the Experience Economy was founded at the University of Amsterdam in 2001 with the main aim to ground the Experience Economy in theory, to specialize in educational programs and to assist organizations in the application of the theory through consulting. Its community of practice includes researchers, teachers, students and practitioners from business and government. Their purpose is to shape the body of knowledge and to apply lessons learned through sharing knowledge and best practices.*

In this report from the European sector of the Experience Economy I would like to share some insights, provide an overview of emerging trends based on research, and demonstrate these trends in practice through European case studies. Our key finding: Experiences created from a place of passion for people (not purely founded in economics) make great contributions to the quality of life and are economically successful in the end. If the motive is purely economical, the lifecycle of these experiences will be shorter than those based on passion for people. These insights will definitely influence the research agenda of the European Centre for the Experience Economy in the near future, to focus more on quality of the lives of individuals and social groups and the role of experience offerings in enhancing this quality of life in an authentic and profitable way.

**What's Going On?**

In examining how the Experience Economy is playing itself out in Europe, we've studied the writings of sociologist, economists, psychologist, philosophers, and others looking at the transformation of European society, including Arnold Cornelis, Meerten ter Borg, Suzanne Piët, Helmut Gaus, and Carl Rohde and Hans van der Loo. Several themes emerge in common:

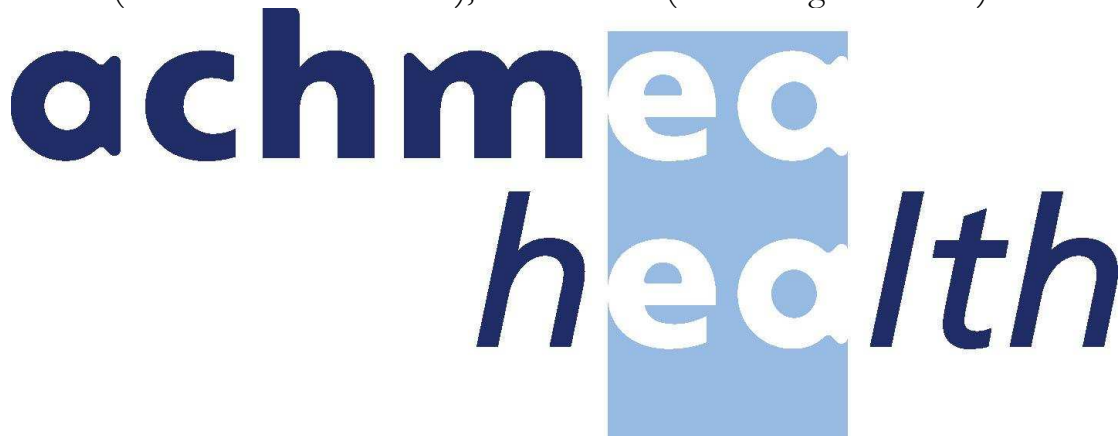
- Society is going through an important and deep transformation, one where self-determination and sense-making are becoming key bywords.
- The economy is taking on an increasing role of helping individuals make meaning in their lives through the exploration of identity.
- Authenticity – being real – increasingly drives how people spend their time.

- Life cannot be fully scripted, but people must be allowed to connect and share with each other.

*While these findings seem to apply in America and other parts of the world as well, they do seem to be more pronounced in European culture.*

## **European Cases Studies**

To illustrate these emerging trends, consider four European cases: Achmea Healthcare (health insurance), ING Private Banking (financial services), ID&T (music & entertainment), and Interdit (a traveling restaurant).



### **Achmea Healthcare**

Achmea Healthcare is the leading Dutch Health Insurer with a full portfolio of insurance services. Its director, Fred Lingg, embarked the company on an experience journey in 2000. He and his management team realized that health insurance was a very low-interest service (until one becomes ill) while the industry was becoming more and more competitive. So Lingg changed Achmea's paradigm from sickness insurer to health provider, from low-interest price competition to high-interest experience staging.

Realizing that prevention is better than curing, Achmea's mission changed to helping people become conscious of how to manage their own health better. Achmea Health considered the needs of customers for health offerings from birth to death and designed unique experiences to fulfill those needs profitably. Achmea Healthcare developed special benefits to members; health centers were acquired; a magazine and website introduced; private clinics instituted; and offerings created in such new areas as re-integration to work after illness.

All the new experience offerings raised revenues and became profitable. Further, Achmea discovered that taking care of the health situation of their clients lessened the amount of money it had to pay to hospitals, doctors, and physiotherapists.

Interestingly, success in the marketplace influenced and accelerated the transformation of the organization. Now, Achmea's staff focuses on the experience of people and not on the rules of delivering care. When health problems do occur, they focus on the needs and desires of their clients and do everything possible to help them regain their health. "It is a matter of empathy and compassion, people first than rules", says Lingg. This is a major shift in the behavior of the staff of Achmea, which previously were mere administrators and not people dedicated to care about others.

But, in fitting with the trends noted above, these experiences are not the scripted ones of, say, a movie or ride, but rather involve real choices of Achmea's clients in facing difficult situations, authentic conversations and circumstances, and meaningful experiences.



The core business of ING private banking is assisting private business owners during take overs. One of the problems of small, privately owned businesses is that owners often have great difficulty in letting go of their businesses when the time comes. For ING Private Banking, however, facilitating the sales and transfer of these businesses is a core activity. So, rather than sponsor the usual golf tournament, director of marketing Jan Sinnema , actually after reading book of Pine & Gilmore, developed the concept of a theme dinner centered on "how to let go of your business".

At these dinners ING sets the stage for what Jan Sinnema calls "a relevant emotional encounter", an almost therapeutic setting whereby every client will go as deep and as far in talking about himself as he likes or wants to. It creates a safe environment where clients can freely speak about their feelings and emotions about something so very closely to their heart. They then connect to and share with other people in very similar circumstances, including past clients who tell their own stories about how they did indeed manage to let go of their business..

The special role ING's personnel is to *not be there*, to not commercially act! Only the director of the regional ING branch is allowed to attend, serving in the role of dinner host. Sinnema had great difficulty convincing his organization of this, but it was the only way to create trust with its clients. And the results have been stunning, with many participants relating how a dinner changed their lives – and with ING gaining many new business opportunities.

## **ID&T**

At the start of the nineties, house music( hard core) was breaking through in the Netherlands. Irfan van Ewijk, Duncan Stutterheim, and Theo Lelie (from whence came I D&T) were so passionate about the music that they began to organize their own house party in 1992 in Utrecht. They each borrowed \$40,000 from their parents and, despite dire warnings from family and friends, succeeded in getting over 8,000 people to attend their post-Graduation party, “The Final Exam”, and made a tidy \$50,000 profit.

After this first success, the three founders wanted to organize even larger raves. And large they became, with names like Thunderdome, Global Hardcore Nation, Mystery Land, Speed Razor, and Earthquake. New offerings, such as CDs, magazines, and other merchandise were added to meet the needs of a whole new sub-culture, called “Gabbers”.

*Thunder Magazine* became the largest-selling dance magazine in the Netherlands, with over 30,000 subscribers. Then, the market changed. The fad around hardcore house music came to an end, and in order to secure its future, ID&T, which at the time employed over 50 people, had to respond. The founders decided to switch to other musical styles and in 1999 organized Innercity in Amsterdam. It was a risk, as never before had such a large indoor event been organized without hardcore music. However, ID&T pulled it off, and today Innercity is, according to its creators, the largest indoor festival of any kind in the world.



New experience offerings like Trance Energy, Shockers, and Massive followed. The latest events, a series called Sensation, White Edition and Black Edition, each draw over 70,000 people dancing from 10 at night until 6 the following morning. Everybody is looking ahead of this special event and everybody confirms to the dress code “white or black”. This year tickets were sold out in two hours.

KPMG conducted research in the dance market and estimated a volume of \$500 million in the Netherlands alone. ID&T further created its own radio station, two more magazines, ID&T magazine, a beach club, and a restaurant. Most recently, a theatre in the center of Amsterdam was transformed into a ‘Moulin Rouge’-like nightclub.



Through it all, ID&T has maintained a core set of values, which founder Duncan Stutterheim says are *intuition, dynamic, creative, unexpected, and no boundaries*. Its “ten commandments” include such sub-culturally specific maxims as “ Only God can judge us, Yesterday is history, today is a gift, tomorrow is a mystery”, “Do the don’ts”, and “Keep your dark side”.

ID&T believes it to be in the core business of creating meaning for a large group of young people in society that are on the threshold of making their mark in life. They help these people make sense of what they see and do in the world, and thereby create their own identities. They construct an environment and a social group to which people can belong and participate in.

### **Interdit, the Cowboys of the Kitchen**

Interdit, which means forbidden in French, is a most unusual culinary concept, designed and implemented by four young creative people from Amsterdam, Brian, Jaymz, Tiddo and Niels. They are “the Cowboys of the Kitchen”, and their concept can be described as a culinary, disobedient, semi- illegal, traveling cultural restaurant.

The Interdit concept is as follows: first of all the collective founders define a location where the event will be taking place. They specifically look for places that are out of the way and have something mysterious about them. A

disco that is empty and needs to be rebuilt, or an old church that is not being used, an old warehouse that is waiting to be transformed into an apartment building, or the latest, the arcade under the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.



Interdit does ask permission from the owner to use the place, but not from the police or other formal organizations. The staff of Interdit knows how to turn these places from nothing to something on the spur of a moment. By using crude, temporary locations, Interdit avoids expensive drawn-out startup periods and stays focused on what they are good at: hospitality, atmosphere, and good food.

The restaurant is only open for a set number of days at a particular location (from a weekend to at most ten days), thereafter going into hiding only to resurface somewhere else after a couple of months. That's how the Interdit concept stays fresh and challenging for both the guests and the initiators. Each new location further offers new perspectives and possibilities. Just a week in advance the founders notify all their contacts and relatives via e-mail and SMS and within a few days they are fully booked.



Guests sit at large tables, bring their friends and enjoy each other's company, even with strangers. They enjoy a good meal and some entertainment. The atmosphere is open and dynamic; there is room to stand up and recite a poem at the dinner table, should one so desire. The processes are smartly organized, and the food, the core essential, is pure and exciting, or as they call it, "*chauvinistic regionaleuropeanstyle*".

The menu is created each day depending on what is freshly available. Primarily organic products are used in light versatile dishes – classic ingredients in innovative combinations. They steer clear of the usual and present a 6-course narrative dinner, commencing for all the guests at the same time, usually 8 pm, and taking up the whole evening. The service is quite unassuming, not formal but friendly and well-meant, supple and noiseless.

Within a few days the experience ends at that particular location. The entrepreneurs seek new adventurous locations to create a fresh Interdit experience and to build a larger pool of Interdit-customers who enjoy the excitement.

The conviction of Interdit is that the public of Amsterdam is ready for a fresh impulse. An initiative that stands for pure values and especially for quality, without getting lost in complicated ideas and gimmicks. Simple, honest, temporary – but definitely innovative and exciting.



Interdit certainly is in the experience business; they create an informal friendly atmosphere together with their guests and friends that often is lacking in professional restaurants. They bring an informal organization to a high professional standard. Their motive, as they say, is to offer pleasure in an unusual way; it's not restricted to economic motives. Its challenge is somewhat like that of ID&T – not becoming part of the “formal world” while keeping the spirit of originality and creativity going.

### **Conclusions**

When looking at these four cases some similarities spring to mind. First of all, we see passion as a major driver of business. In the case of ID&T the whole business started with a passion for music and dance. Interdit is based on a passion for people and for the combination of good food and unique locations. Achmea shows a passion for their customers' health, and ING for their clients' lifestyles and legacy. All four also focus on more than just the economic value. ID&T offers a feeling of togetherness, of belonging to something bigger than yourself, Interdit offers an ideal in combination with spontaneity, Achmea offers a context for the health of its customers, and ING a time and place where entrepreneurs can learn from each other about the next stage in their lives.

Overall, these cases illustrate that an experience provider with a passion for people and their specific needs (health, food, entertainment, togetherness, surprise, excitement, relaxation, etc.) is able to generate successful business. More specifically, these cases well illustrate the emerging trends of self-

determination and sense-making, identity and meaning, authenticity, and connecting and sharing through un-scripted interactions.

In Europe the trend is towards more customer-driven experiences that enhance the quality of life, where economics are not the only driving value. Many staged experiences are considered too commercial, too artificial, too superficial, and too boring. Confronted with the question of what values they are looking for, people respond not with economic values, but social values (e.g., friendship, intimacy), cultural values (e.g., honesty, involvement, idealism), and personal values (e.g., independence, self-expression). People seek a balance between control by the experience stager and self-determined activity with its spontaneity, freedom, and self-expression.

Businesses should ask themselves: how can they make a worthwhile contribution to the quality of lives of individuals and of social groups through meaningful and compelling experiences?