

FROM MADFEST TO MEDCOMMS

Why Boldness, Emotion, and Integrated Experiences Will Define the Future of Pharma Marketing

What is MadFest?

MadFest isn't your typical marketing event. Apparently, it started over a few beers and a big idea: what if marketing events were actually fun, useful, and didn't make you want to gouge your eyes out? Since 2018, it's become the UK's loudest and least boring marketing festival for brands, creatives, start-ups, and disruptors.

Over three hot days, 12,000+ people filled The Truman Brewery in London under the theme "Don't Be Boring." It's raw, fast-paced, plugged into culture—and there's A LOT pharma and Med Comms can take from it. While our industry often defaults to "safe," the rest of the world (and the biggest brands) are moving forward boldly.

What we took from the big brands

1. **AI + agility = the new standard:** Everyone's using AI. That's not a headline anymore. The real shift is speed. From idea to execution in days (even hours!). Brands are testing and building AI-capable systems that learn fast, adapt faster, and scale without dragging things through endless process (sound familiar?)
2. **Creativity isn't nice to have—it's a differentiator:** The brands winning attention aren't shouting louder. They're "feeling" more. By that, we mean that work that resonates emotionally, visually, and tonally is what's cutting through. It earns attention because it feels real and it actually says something
3. **Blending physical and digital engagement is the new normal:** Online and offline. Real and virtual. We need to start thinking about the full experience. Congress, webinar, social, etc—should all feel like one smart journey and not five random tactics
4. **Authenticity beats everything:** Audiences aren't buying "shiny" anymore. They want real voices, raw stories, and imperfect truth. What lands is what feels human
5. **Boldness builds brands:** Playing safe is playing small. The best brands at MadFest weren't the safest. Risky, weird, sometimes polarizing—but memorable. They had something to say and didn't try to please everyone

AI + agility: the new operating system

AI is now the cost of entry. At MadFest, brands weren't talking about AI; they were showing what happens when it's embedded across how they operate and create. Hovis is using it to speed up product development. Jaguar is using AI-powered cultural insights to reinvent its brand. The common thread? Speed and adaptability.

"When the uncertainty is reduced, AI will be unleashed."

– Sir Martin Sorrell

Implications for med comms: We can't treat AI as a pilot or an experiment. We need to bake it into the way we work: automate repeatable tasks, surface real insights, scale content intelligently, and spot signals early. Pharma's layers of process and sign-off make this harder, but that's a design challenge we must solve. AI won't replace creativity or strategy—it shines a light on where we're wasting time and frees us to focus on what moves the needle.

The emotional advantage: creativity that cuts through

MadFest reinforced what we already know: brands that connect emotionally win. McDonald's, M&S, and LEGO didn't just deliver polished work; they showed up with a clear voice and stories that mattered. Emotional resonance wasn't a nice-to-have; it was the difference.

"Only art makes you feel, and only feeling makes you act."

– Orlando Wood

Implications for med comms: Scientific accuracy is table stakes. We need to pair it with sharper storytelling, a stronger brand voice, and an emotional hook that resonates to cut through the noise. Whether speaking to HCPs or patients, our work should connect in ways that inspire action without ever compromising credibility.

Hybrid experiences are already here—now design like it

MadFest was a masterclass in designing experiences that blend digital and physical seamlessly. Disney, Coca-Cola, and Reddit are integrating live and online engagement to build connected brand journeys. It's no longer about one-off touchpoints—it's about creating a joined-up experience.

"Digital isn't new—it's necessary. But connection is what consumers remember."

Implications for med comms: We're still too focused on isolated tactics—a webinar here, a congress booth there. We need to design journeys, not just individual pieces—plan how someone first discovers a message, how it's reinforced across channels, and how it's cemented in follow-up. Use data, modular content, and platforms to make the experience feel intentional and connected

Authenticity still wins—even in an algorithmic world

MadFest was a clear rejection of "performative" marketing. Audiences, especially younger ones, see through the polish and want something authentic. The work that resonated most was real, human, and sometimes imperfect. Tesco described a relentless focus on customers and their communities; Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson highlighted the value of sharing personal truths, urging brands to engage authentically and take meaningful action;



and Vinted emphasised the importance of rooting brand purpose in the genuine motivations and everyday realities of your audience. "Purpose may inspire, but it's truth that earns belief and trust."

"You can't have artificial intelligence without actual intelligence—and that comes from humans."

– Reddit

Implications for med comms: We must stop over-engineering. Real voices—patients, clinicians, caregivers—need to lead our work, not just feature in it. It's not about box-ticking inclusivity; it's about credibility and relatability. In healthcare, trust is currency. Empathy and honesty will define the work that makes a difference.

Bold beats safe

At MadFest, the standout work didn't play it safe. Jaguar's "Copy Nothing" rebrand. Original Source's weird, AI-generated TV ad. It wasn't about shock for shock's sake. It was about having a point of view and being brave enough to show it. The brands that evolve are the ones that are unafraid to experiment, polarize, and break their own rules.

"Polarization isn't bad. You can't please everyone in a niche market."

– Jaguar

Implications for med comms: We talk a lot about innovation but then default to what feels safe. That gap is where bold ideas die. If we want to shift behavior, change mindsets, or drive action, the work has to have some edge. Not reckless. Just intentional, distinctive, and unafraid. Safe work rarely moves anything.

Final thoughts: less talk more action

MadFest 2025 wasn't just an innovation showcase—it was a challenge. The brands shaping the future aren't just talking about AI or creativity or connection. They're doing it! Fast, boldly, and without overthinking it. Our industry craves work that actually does something. We've got to stop playing it safe and start building with more pace, energy, and purpose.

Be braver. Move faster. Make it matter ■

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