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THE JOY OF THEMING by Joe Pine & Jim Gilmore

The 2001 EXPY award winner themes in an incredibly effective way – and impressed us so much that we held our 2002 thinkAbout at one of its venues!

There's a lot of controversy today surrounding theming. Many critics say that theming has outlived its usefulness, that places shouldn't be themed – even that the term should be avoided altogether. Our view is that there's nothing wrong with the concept, just with its execution.

Indeed, *everything* is themed, whether done intentionally or not. (For academic support of that somewhat self-evident statement, read Mark Gottdeiner's *The Theming of America*.) However, not everything is themed well; many companies simply do it poorly. The most common errors are:

- Mistaking the themed environment for the experience, rather than merely the set within which experiences occur;

- Thinking a great theme permits one's underlying goods and services to be of lower quality;

- Making the theme over-the-top and too in-your-face.

The reason for the poor reputation of theming today results directly from such errors of design and execution, particularly amongst theme restaurants. But let's not close the chapter on theming just because of a few bankrupt themers. It remains one of the best techniques for turning an otherwise mundane service into an engaging experience. And if you do theming well, no one will call you "themed".

Consider the company we think does it better than anyone else: Joie de Vivre

Hospitality. Its founder, Chip Conley, entered the hospitality business at the age of twenty-six by buying a cheap, rundown motel in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. (How rundown? It was known to charge by the hour.) Chip wanted to create a unique hotel experience, but he didn't have the money to perform any market research to identify who might be attracted to the venue. So he glommed onto an industry that did – magazines – and themed his Hotel Phoenix after *Rolling Stone*!

Chip and his young management team at JDV examined back issues of *Rolling Stone*, rifling through the articles and advertisements, to determine the five impressions that this rock-n-roll rag imparted to its readers. Their list: adventurous, hip, irreverent, funky, and young-at-heart. Then, they re-designed the entire place (much of it cosmetically, and therefore inexpensively) by harmonizing these impressions into a consistent, coherent, and compelling theme. They turned the swimming pool into a "Dive-in" for partying, colorfully redecorated guest rooms, and slapped bumper-stickers from local bands on the housekeeping carts. They also set up staff as "listening posts" to pick up ideas for enhancing the experience over time.

Note that JDV didn't name the hotel after the magazine, advertise the connection, nor even tell guests of the theme. Rather, that theme remained unspoken. But it was there, serving as the organizing principle for the entire experience. It proved successful, as room rates and occupancy levels soared. And amazingly, without revealing its theme, the Hotel

Phoenix became *the* happening place to stay in San Francisco for touring rock bands and their road crews (over 400 stayed there in 2002!).

Using this same “pick a magazine” theming technique for each of its properties, JDV Hospitality has grown into the Bay Area’s leading purveyor of boutique experiences, with twenty-four hotels, five restaurants and bars, one day spa, and the world’s first luxury camping resort, Costanoa. (For more, visit www.jdvhospitality.com.)

So much does JDV Hospitality excel at theming that Chip Conley and his company won our 2001 Experience Stager of the Year Award – the EXPY – at our think-About in Las Vegas. (Each participant

received a signed copy of Chip’s book on his entrepreneurial adventures, *Rebel Rules*.) Moreover, we held the 2002 think-About at JDV’s Hotel Avante in Mountain View, California. We took over the entire hotel to create our own intellectual dormitory, with spaces topically themed around the issues most important to experience stagers today – including the theme of theming itself, with the “Magazine Man” himself on hand in his own hotel.

To learn from Chip today, think about what pop icon (to generalize the notion of magazines) you could use to theme your place. And like Chip, keep it to yourself – let your guests experience the joy of your unspoken theme for themselves.