

Getting Serious About Experiences

Three imperatives for shifting from traditional marketing to staged experiences

Many companies today struggle to generate new demand, thanks to the fragmentation of mass media, the ineffectiveness of most advertising, and the elusive nature of the World Wide Web as an effective marketing vehicle.

As a result, today's marketing landscape is littered with various "adjective-based" marketing concepts—guerilla marketing, permission marketing, and viral marketing, to name but a few—promising new-found avenues to success. But the very need to qualify the term marketing points to the heart of today's demand-creation conundrum: People have become relatively immune to messages targeted at them.

Therefore, the best way to attract and retain customers is to create experiences *within* them. Knowing this, many companies have begun to establish location-based experiences, like General Mills' Cereal Adventure at the Mall of America, Heineken's new Heineken Experience in Amsterdam, LEGO's multiple LEGOLand theme parks, Pleasant Company's American Girl Place off Chicago's Magnificent Mile, and Volkswagen's Autostadt in Wolfsburg, Germany. An amazing array of event-based experiences has simultaneously emerged (to be chronicled by this fine new magazine), with ever more imaginative programming for each new product launch or promotion being staged.

Even B2B companies are getting into the act. Case Construction Equipment created the Case Tomahawk Experience Center in rural Wisconsin to provide a

life-size outdoor "sandbox" for potential customers to operate its large earth-moving gear in a low-key, relaxed atmosphere before they buy. Folks have so much fun playing with the equipment that the relationships created there dramatically increase close rates.

Tellingly, the money for such experiences often comes out of each company's marketing and/or communications budgets.

Indeed, let's cement this trend as an unapologetic operating principle: ***Steal from traditional marketing.*** As a start, carve out 20 percent of your traditional p.r. and advertising budgets and put it into the realm of physical experiences. Such experiences engender emotional connections and create memories with which no mere marketing message can hope to compete.

Indeed, a number of experience stagers manage to forgo completely or do very little traditional advertising. Ian Schrager Hotels, Starbucks, Recreational Equipment, Vans, and a host of others choose to let their experiences alone serve the purpose of acquiring new customers and energizing old ones.

As a corollary: ***Use your Creative as your R&D.*** Don't view your internal marketing talent or external agencies as resources solely to be wasted on traditional marketing campaigns, but as the very designers of paid-for experiences. When it comes to experiences, it's no longer your father's R&D. The folks back in the lab designing your physical goods

or in the field developing your new service offerings are unlikely to have the necessary background or skills to design and script, much less construct and cast, a compelling experience.

Think of some of the high-profile advertisements of the past few years. What if we unleashed all that creativity on conceiving, designing, and bringing to market revenue-generating experiences? Instead of just creating those wonderful youth-dancing commercials for the Gap, what if its ad agency were contracted to conceive, design, and roll-out—in other words, innovate!—dance clubs, dance marathons, and other dance events where kids pay to gyrate in their outfits? (And perhaps others pay to watch on the Web.) What if Nike's incredibly creative talent were used not just to put those basketball-passing, sneaker-squeaking, breath-exhaling commercials on the air, but also to design real basketball tournaments and other sporting events at or near their Niketown stores? Don't *just* show it, *do it!*

And don't stop at just one experience: ***Create a rich portfolio of experiences.*** You should stage a series of related venues and events that flow one from another, creating demand up and down multiple echelons of experience. Remember: "*The experience IS the marketing.* The future of your business rests in staging truly engaging experiences that over time displace traditional marketing. **EM**

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