

Brandweek: Experiential Marketing

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People in today's society are just too busy. They are always running late, and have weekly calendars loaded with more things than they can do in a month.

Edward M. Hallowell's book "Crazy Busy" states that we are suffering from culturally induced A.D.D. Could it be because marketers aren't helping by bombarding the average person with thousands of messages a day?

Now mix in a little technology like TiVo. What you then have is biology and technology working against your brand's brief moment in time to effectively get your message out. What you need is a way to reach potential customers that grabs them emotionally and personally, connecting them to your brand for life — the very definition of a successful experiential marketing campaign.

I think it's only fitting to open this piece with the opening from the International Experiential Marketing Association (IXMA) manifesto. IXMA, a global consortium of professionals and students of the art, will be re-launching in January with a highly respected association partner. This affiliation will showcase how experiential marketing has come to be accepted as a "must integrate" marketing methodology:

"Markets have undergone a profound transformation after decades of top-down corporate messaging. As you read this, the marketing world is changing, and with it the way business will be conducted for decades to come. This change is being demanded by the enlightened and empowered consumer - the new prosumer - who no longer responds to being assaulted by one-thing-fits-all branded media messages. Most current advertising still relies on obsessive proliferation of the brand through mass media that seek economies of scale - the more eyeballs, the better. But customers want more than mass messages sent to undifferentiated eyeballs. They want respect, recognition and relevant communication, and they've indicated the best way to give it to them is through experiences that are personally relevant, memorable, sensory, emotional and meaningful. Customers have changed dramatically, and the brand world must change to meet their needs and desires, or lose them to those who recognize the unique influences shaping the evolving marketplace."

Advertisers have become used to creating mass marketing messages in a onsize-fits-all mentality. But it's time to take a new look at how we are reaching those customers and how best to win their loyalty.

I had dinner in Portugal recently with David Wolfe, an expert in the field. He said it best: "The days of monologue marketing are over. Today's customer wants to be involved in the marketing process by being engaged in a dialogue with you and your brand." That forms the basis of the best in experiential marketing.

The definition of experiential marketing is fluid - as is the methodology itself. It was once little talked about, and is now being embraced as a silver bullet. I once posed the simple question of experiential marketing's definition to the Experiential Marketing Forum (experientialforum.com), and received more than 200 definitions from more than 150 countries.

Experiential marketing is really quite amazing. It's equal parts philosophy, artistry and psychology. Simply put, experiential marketing is a more holistic approach to the customer/brand relationship.

Experiential campaigns are designed to appeal to both our rational and emotional side. They go way beyond traditional feature-benefit methodology, and open up new points of connection with customers - their senses, hearts, and if you do it just right, their souls.

Experiential marketing can be used on any canvas, but the live marketing scenario affords one of the better avenues to create a fully immersive brand experience.

Having said that, we know that strategically created print, TV and radio ads can also be highly experiential. To say that experiential marketing can't be used in static mediums such as print is to say that a picture has never made you cry. A customer will connect emotionally with a great experiential campaign regardless of the medium when it's created with them in mind.

Experiential methodology allows brands to foster one-to-one connections with their intended audience. I often draw the analogy between experiential marketing and going to a concert.

It never matters at all that there are 49,000 other people in the auditorium listening and mouthing the same words to the songs- each fan clearly feels that the lead singer is singing directly to them. It's a very rich internal and external experience. The band has formed individual bonds with each of their fans. Each one takes ownership while interpreting the songs in their own way.

All brands should try to be the rock star, and provide exceptional and unique experiences to form lasting relationships with new fans.

Of late, brands of every kind have taken notice of the effectiveness of delivering a great and relevant personal experience for their customers and potential customers.

Brands like Fila, Volkswagen and Wells Fargo have recently opened experiential marketing divisions within their companies. As far back as 2004, McDonald's CMO Larry Light declared that mass marketing was no longer viable. I don't fully agree with that statement, but I do think marketing in mass media needs to be accompanied by an overall personal and brand relevant experience.

Each customer touch point should be seen as part of one seamless brand experience. Any disconnect in that great experience will ultimately cause confusion, and your audience will simply move along to a better one.

Often, in certain industry categories, experiential campaigns actually serve as the single biggest point of differentiation between brands.

Take the financial services industry for example. Each company offers similar products and services. How can these brands connect with customers, and ensure they understand what makes one company better than another?

"We're a company that prides ourselves on putting customers first," said Tim Collins svp of Wells Fargo experiential marketing. "We could have chosen to simply say that we care, but a better choice was to show that we care by allowing customers to experience it for themselves."

Swivel Media and Wells Fargo created a number of engaging and interactive experiential campaigns, including the virtual world live brand experience Stagecoach Island, to both entertain and inform young adults.

That is a truly winning position in a marketplace that is becoming increasingly transparent. When a brand provides an excellent experience it begins to win the hearts and minds of customers and gain the ultimate competitive advantage. To further explore this notion I would recommend picking up a copy of Pine and Gillmore's book "The Experience Economy."

And since we started this introduction by speaking of time, or the lack thereof, these are very interesting times indeed., For those of us who are determined to remain fluid, aware, and personally connected to our customers by not wasting their precious time, it's getting more interesting every day.