

Experiential marketing

Advice on the potential and pitfalls of a growing trend

In a world where consumers are growing more and more indifferent or cynical towards advertising, marketers are faced with the challenge of finding new ways to capture the attention of their audience. A current trend in the efforts to try out different techniques is experiential marketing. This relatively new approach to winning consumers is based around the idea that the target audience should be involved in an active experience of brand values. Rather than put out print or television adverts, which marketers hope will be passively consumed, they create a brand environment in a public space and involve potential consumers by asking them to take part in an activity. For example, at a sports match interval, a goal area covered in a brand name might be set up and people will be asked if they want to win a free gift by trying to shoot a goal. Or, in a nightclub, a drinks company might sponsor an exclusive area and give out samples of their drink in a luxurious setting. The idea is always roughly the same: if a consumer actively feels positive emotions in association with a brand then they are more likely to develop loyalty to it.

The music festival

Over the past ten years, music festivals have become a very popular venue at which to target young consumers *en masse*. Indeed, marketing at festivals has become a bit of a bandwagon that more and more brands are jumping onto. The attraction, of course, is that fact that the atmosphere is always a mixture of easy-going yet upbeat, and thousands of young people have time to kill as they wait for the next act to come on stage. But that shouldn't be enough. Too many brands are failing to think hard about why they want to be there and what they want to achieve, and overlook the possibility of throwing money away or even having a detrimental impact.

Brand managers should remember that people at festivals will resent being marketed to constantly unless they see the experience as adding something to their day. It has to enhance the positive mood they are already in rather than distract them from it. Thus, the brand's values should be closely linked to what festival-goers expect from a weekend of music. Taking a brand to a festival to capture a whole new demographic is not a good enough reason to go, and people will resent any brand that they feel has no place there. You will not add credence or "cool" to your brand by taking it to a music festival unless your brand has credence or cool to start with.

So if you think your brand really is right for the music festival environment, how do you set up an effective experiential marketing campaign? According to Hugh Robertson and Rob Wilson, the first thing you must clarify are some commercial objectives that must be measurable as well as achievable. This might be easier said than done as there are no specific metric models for festivals. You must also take into account the fact that festivals are national events with people coming from all over, so a rise in sales cannot be measured

accurately in the host town alone. Further, there is no immediate purchase, making it difficult to track response. Despite these obstacles, Robertson and Wilson suggest that brand-health checking models can be used as long as festivals are incorporated into them a substantial time before the event itself. They also suggest gathering data on the audience and staying in contact with them.

Online communities such as Facebook and MySpace might provide just the opportunity for brand managers to establish a relationship with consumers that lasts longer than just the few seconds or minutes they take part in an experiential marketing campaign. Planned well to take advantage of recent innovations and trends, campaigns can work 365 days of the year.

Experiential ideas

Of the many marketing campaigns that have taken place at music festivals recently, two stand out as fine examples. The first has been running in the same way for nine years, and each year provides a positive and relevant experience to music fans – in fact it is now seen as part of the festival experience. The Strongbow Cider House is a recognized area of the arena, which is heavily branded and only serves cider. The campaign is designed to increase loyalty, but it also promotes the product attributes by providing a fun and comfortable environment in which to enjoy a refreshing beverage on a hot day. In a newer campaign for Trident chewing gum, marketers used a designated area of the festival site to run a branded concept. They offered a range of entertainment from DJs, aiming to connect a positive and different experience with the brand.

Developing on the idea of appearing at music festivals, some brands are now planning their own entire festival or day, whereby the brand is intimately connected to various experiences, all of which can be chosen by the brand manager. Successful and well-known examples include O2 Wireless Festivals, Ben & Jerry's Sundae on the Common and Innocent's Village Fete. Even more creative, perhaps, was travel web site Expedia's Blue Sky Day, which took place in Trafalgar Square in London. Reflecting the brand's theme of blue skies and letting go, consumers were invited to express themselves artistically on one of hundreds of blue canvases that had been set up in the busy square. With innovation, it seems, just about any brand can come up with a novel idea for an experiential campaign.

Another recent addition to marketing experiences on offer in London is Fiat's new showroom just off Oxford Street. Developed to launch the car company's new 500 model, the traditional soulless car salesroom environment has been completely redesigned to focus on customer interaction. Sales staff have been moved into the background, replaced by huge screens that show the car in performance, allowing customers to choose the content they want to see. Face-to-face activities are also being added, and the location of the showroom as well as its eye-catching design are already significantly increasing footfall.

Flow

The key to the long term success of all of these campaigns will be monitoring their effect and learning new things after each experience. Researchers are now paying more attention to experiential marketing and are focused on developing ways to get useful data from experiential situations. In addition to the suggestions put forward by Robertson and Wilson, researchers at Chemnitz University of Technology have developed a flow model to chart the effects of experience on brand. Flow is described as the enjoyable psychological state we feel when totally immersed in an activity, and achieving strong flow should be central to any brand manager's plans. Their work has showed that flow depends on active participation, and that an activity must be clearly structured with minimal distraction and immediate

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feedback. Though research continues, done carefully and thoughtfully experiential marketing looks set to take over old, passive techniques.

Comment

This is a review of “Does flow influence the brand image in event marketing?” by Jan Drengner, Hansjoerg Gaus and Steffen Jahn, “Plan now, enjoy later (experiential marketing)” by Robert McLuhan and “Experiential marketing – the music festival bandwagon” by Hugh Robertson and Rob Wilson.

“Does flow influence the brand image in event marketing?” evaluates the effects of event marketing on consumer attitudes towards the brand. The authors define event marketing as experiential, measuring its effects with an “attitude towards the advertisement” framework and a flow construct to examine whether the active participation of the audience results in an improved brand image. They put forward a number of hypotheses, which were tested on people attending a street-soccer tournament organized by a chain of shopping centers, and conclude that flow has a meaningful indirect effect on the event image via positive emotions.

McLuhan discusses how agency planners and clients ensure that their experiential marketing campaigns target the right people at the right time and create a long-lasting dialogue with consumers. The article presents a case study of Fiat’s new showroom in London as an example of how big experiential activities have captured marketers’ imaginations as well as consumer participation. To use experiential marketing successfully, McLuhan advises starting with strategic thought, clear objectives and a set budget. From this point, a brand must choose its ambassadors with care, and make sure that accurate metrics is built in at the planning stage.

“Experiential marketing – the music festival bandwagon” explains how music festivals can create traps for experiential marketers and identifies how to make festivals work as part of an effective marketing strategy. The authors explain that an experiential campaign such as this should only be carried out if the brand knows exactly how impact will be measured. Further, the objectives of the event should be outlined well ahead of the festival, and should form part of a broader strategy. Many experiential marketing campaigns deliver little, but carried out in the right way they can add long-term value.

Keywords:

Brand image,
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Brand management,
Marketing strategy,
Sales force

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