

The organiser, the event brand, and the exhibitor

Vivid-Interface's Geoffrey Dixon on the relationship between exhibitor and event organiser, and seeing the brand as 'a friend'.

OVER THE PAST 12 months a significant amount of our time has been spent conducting in-depth interviews with exhibitors on behalf of event organisers. The aim of much of this work has been to obtain a better understanding of the markets the events serve. Through discussing events in-depth, we have also been able to build up a picture of how exhibiting companies view their relationship with event organisers.

The initial point I want to make is that we have found exhibiting companies want to have a close association with the event brand they work with. They feel a sense of ownership of the brand, and the brand is a friend. Even when the event is in decline, that friendship remains in that they want the event to do well.

For years I have been encouraging organising companies to develop closer product and brand relationships with exhibitors. Our recent work has justified the belief that this is not only possible, but welcome. It has to deliver the right product for the exhibitor, but if organisers can develop a relationship with exhibitors in a way that will help them to develop their market presence, then the door is open.

For example, exhibitors would take advice from the organiser on market issues, or look forward to receiving market intelligence from them. Unfortunately, we still find that many event organisers do not work to develop a close working relationship with their markets.

The problem that we have here is a radical disconnect between the brand, the organiser and the exhibiting business partner. In most cases, we find exhibiting business partners are affectionate and loyal to the brand. But in fewer cases we see evidence where the organiser has thought to exploit the 'brand friendship' in relationship development, and product enhancement programmes.

I think a significant issue we as an industry face is companies being driven by the square metre. The management drive is for



Dixon: "Some organisers revel in serendipity, but the clever ones don't"

sales on the event floor, and not about developing relationships with exhibiting companies.

Here are a couple of recent and typical quotes:

"Tim comes up to see us once a year. He is pleasant but he comes up from London, has a cup of coffee and a chat, and then goes home again. This is not account management, it is not even selling. What he does could be done on the telephone. His visit has no impact whatsoever on whether we decide to exhibit or not."

"The show director comes to see us once a year. Last year we told him we wanted to have a big stand and his eyes nearly popped out. Next year we probably will not take a stand unless we can think of a good reason to have one."

"We get a phone call and we tell them the size of stand space

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we want, and then we have virtually no human contact until we are on-site. Occasionally we get a telephone call looking for press releases, but that's all."

"The show has declined a lot over the years, and the reason is that it has lost touch with how the market works. In the beginning they had it just right, it was perfect. But, the market has changed considerably, and the show does not reflect it any more. There are four main components to the market, and it only covers one or two of them. They don't even think of the visitors. Their businesses have had to change to reflect the market. None of this is featured, and yet this would provide the opportunity to attract more exhibitors and expand the show."

Interestingly, in each case exhibitors were still positive about the event. They felt the shows made a positive contribution to their businesses, but they wanted more from the event, and they wanted more than a once a year order signing session from the event organiser.

The problem in each of the cases above is that no one with expertise in the sector would believe the event organisers had the knowledge to develop exciting brand extension propositions, which the market would readily accept.

We must understand that brand values do not come cheaply or easily. It takes a concerted effort over a number of years to develop positive brand values that give a show the strength to launch into new product areas.

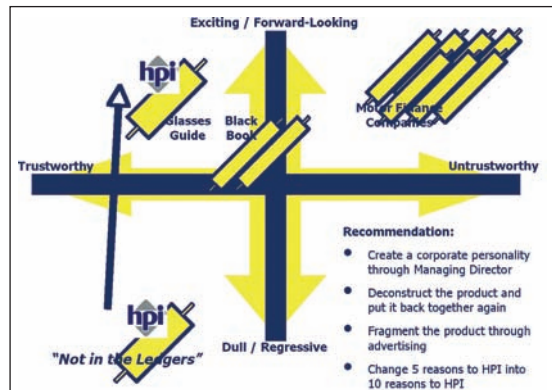
An example of this comes from the work we did with HPI, an automotive information company currently part of Norwich Union. HPI wanted to embark on an ambitious new product development programme, but I was concerned that the market was not ready for a new product onslaught from them. I felt it was close to anonymous in the automotive industry, despite the fact that the motor dealer network could not work without its information.

We undertook a qualitative research programme with motor dealers across the UK, and developed perceptual maps of how dealers viewed the market.

The research programme showed that I was right. HPI was dull

but efficient. We recommended a detailed PR and advertising programme.

Eighteen months later we conducted the research programme again, and the market perception of HPI had changed to a point where new product launches and leadership in automotive market information was accepted, and now expected.



We conducted another project last year for a top five international oil brand based in Texas. We were tasked to develop an understanding of its marine oil brand values and to understand how these differed from the core corporate brand. This understanding was critical in enabling the company to begin a brand migration project, where all of its brands worldwide would eventually come under one umbrella.

What we found was the marine brand and the core corporate brand attracted very different brand perceptions. In this case, to have changed immediately from the marine brand to the corporate brand without a significant marketing communications programme could have been disastrous. The marine division had an annual turnover of more than \$18 billion, so any mistakes could have been very costly.

The point is to understand the importance of brand perceptions, and how these are related to product delivery. No company gets positive brand values given to it. They have to earn them, and then ensure the product and service delivery maintains those product values. Where necessary, they can act as a platform for the development of new values to support the development of the business.

Returning to event organisers, the same rules apply. Organisers must have a brand strategy. They must develop an understanding of how the market views them and the product, and see how this is different from how they want to be perceived in the marketplace. They must understand what their brand elasticity is today, and understand if the current elasticity will allow them to successfully develop into new product areas, or into new markets.

The alternative is brand serendipity. Some organisers revel in serendipity, but the clever ones don't.

