

Engaging customers

Vivid Interface MD Geoffrey Dixon on answering brand managers' questions to gain a slice of experiential marketing budgets.

THE TERM EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING is heard a lot these days. It is a term that is readily applied to trade shows and consumer exhibitions.

The concept of experiential marketing stretches a lot further than being an exhibitor, or sponsor, at a trade show or exhibition. And as brands are looking for experiential media, their requirements, in terms of information and fulfilment, often differ from many exhibiting companies today.

The experiential market is growing. One significant reason for this growth is the increased fragmentation of media. Consumers are bombarded with thousands of marketing messages every day. As a result, it has become much more difficult to distinguish between the messages that are relevant and those that are not. Or those that can be beneficial from those that are not. This means it is harder for brands to cut through in conventional advertising and brand promotion in b2c and b2b markets.

Talking to creative agencies that represent clients who invest significantly in creative marketing, we are told the main reason for the growth in experiential marketing is a strong desire to develop a real engagement with the customer. This engagement with customers, and potential customers, is believed to result in more direct access to their personal brand discriminators that seek to discard the meaningful and positive marketing messages from the 'marketing litter' we all need to discard to maintain our sanity.

Trade shows and consumer exhibitions should be the natural constituency for this type of marketing investment. Brands should be knocking at the door of events organisers to spend their money.

The reality is not so easy. Investment by brands is something that has to be earned rather than taken for granted. Just because



Consumers: bombarded with marketing messages every day

exhibition and trade show audiences can be delivered to an exhibitor or sponsor, does not guarantee money in the bank.

To get the big brand bucks, the events industry needs to become even more sophisticated in its approach if it is to persuade them of the return on investment they need.

What do brands want from experiential marketing? And how can event organisers present a compelling argument to work with them?

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All brands are different. Each has its own distinct market position, brand characteristics and objectives in seeking customer and market engagement.

If we accept this, then we must then accept organisers have to establish exactly what these market positions, brand characteristics and objectives are. This means we have to have people in our sales team who are able to talk to brand managers and the agencies supporting them. They need to speak the same language and supply the right information to enable a brand or creative manager to recommend an event to their client, or senior managers.

Vivid talks to these creative agencies all the time. They want information, and they want to be advised how involvement of their brand will be beneficial.

Agencies talk of a need to provide return on inspiration or return on engagement. This recognises that return on investment is a measure that is lacking in dimension, and in most cases is an unrealistic measure to obtain. It is unrealistic because brands are seeking to establish a long term and developing relationship with a consumer – to develop a relationship through engagement that will encourage or influence brand advocacy, as well as individual trial and purchase. This is not just about pounds and pence; this is about understanding how brands relate to consumers and how consumers relate to brands. And this is not just about b2c brands; the same elements apply to b2b brand relationships.

At a recent automotive event, Vivid worked for a major automotive service brand looking at the affects of brand exposure, how this changed perceptions, and understanding the width and breadth of the brand offer. And importantly, how exposure to the brand was likely to influence future purchasing decisions and brand advocacy within social networks.

We even looked at how likely the respondents would be to engage in further event activity related to the brand sponsorship of events. We investigated the degree to which the respondents felt the brand had 'brand permission' to operate within the areas of sponsorship they were investing in.

We were able to show a clear picture of the impact of engagement for each of the areas investigated. The client was left in the happy state of having a multi-dimensional understanding of the results of their investment and the likely future benefit from continuing with their investment in sponsorship.

What does this all mean to an event organiser?

It means that if organisers want to have a growing slice of

experiential marketing spend, they have to become more sophisticated in how they measure their events. They have to be able to show how engagement with the show brand can lead to engagement with the event visitor.



Diixon: There are a lot of experiential pounds to be got

It can be done, but it means that research for an event should not just be about getting some statistics for the exhibitor brochure. Research must focus on understanding the relationship the visitor has with the show, and how the show works in helping to develop engagement with the brands at the show. Not only immediately at the show, but also after the show has finished and into the future.

The research can even become brand specific, targeting the value of exposure to brands at the event. We know the type of activity they are involved with at the show, and we can easily gain an understanding of what the brand is seeking to achieve by their involvement with the show. Measuring the impact is relatively easy, and the benefits to the show bottom line can be enormous.

Channell Events' Bev Channell often talks about using the research data from 'Music Live', the show she was event director of when she was at Clarion. For her, the big difference in landing big brands like Roland and Yamaha and to encourage them to have an enormous experiential presence at the show, was the research information that segmented the audience. This showed quite clearly what impact the show was able to deliver through engagement between brands and

visitors.

Engagement with the show encouraged trial, purchase and advocacy – each one a valuable commodity in its own right. Channell has a simple message to organisers

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she works with to increase sponsorship sales. The message is all about the need to be able to demonstrate that experiential marketing works. The only way this can be done is through the medium of market research. This research proves who attends the event, and how the event influences their future habits and their engagement with brands visitors are exposed to at the event.

There are a lot of experiential pounds to be got. Exhibitions and trade shows are a superb experiential medium. But, organisers have to be prepared to understand what the brands want and to be able to prove the event can deliver it.

Purely selling square metres against an expected footfall does not provide the answer to the sophisticated brand manager's questions.