

Creating rapport with experiences

How do marketers use their brand in a live environment? Robert McLuhan investigates

Field marketers have few doubts about the importance of brand experience. The face-to-face activity they provide, whether basic street sampling or more elaborate roadshows, offers an opportunity for memorable encounters that fix a brand firmly in consumers' minds.

But in the wider marketing community there is a question mark over what companies mean when they use the term. Is it the classic definition put forward by experiential specialists: staging interesting events to create pleasant associations? Or does it describe marketers' aim to get consumers closely involved on a personal level, instead of simply bombarding them with marketing messages?

Research commissioned by *Marketing* and experiential agency RPM, and carried out by Through the Loop, firmly suggests that the latter is the case. The survey of 140 senior marketers and brand managers, called 'Experience Counts', showed a strong shift toward engaging consumers on a personal level – particularly in the financial services, travel and leisure, food and drink, and the media sectors. But they preferred existing methods to new ideas.

Brand experience is seen ideally as permeating the whole of an organisation, creating a variety of touchpoints to provide the consumer with a direct personal encounter. "It's a principle rather than a stand-alone tool," says

Will Pugh, marketing director for healthcare company Passion for Life. Respondents agree that brands and people can be connected by using 'emotional and sensory triggers', a definition that has traditionally been seen as largely unique to experiential activity carried out by specialists.

They also rate interactivity highly. "I like to think of brand experience as 3D advertising that includes the consumer," says Catherine Herbert, marketing manager for Martini. "It's personal, immediate and interactive."

Some marketers even feel the concept of brand experience extends to how companies deal with customers. "It's about the customer's experience of us and how we behave," explains Catherine Comben, marketing director for printing firm Ventura Works. So feedback is valued for helping firms adjust their products to needs.

Visual imagery is rated as the most important element of brand experience, and personal participation second. Live theatre is ranked lowest, underlining that what to field marketers is a key ingredient is seen as less essential by marketers generally.

Demonstration is important where the product is new or complex or the company is encouraging consumers to use it differently. "Educating the customer about what we do is important. Getting them to understand more about how we work acts as a marketing tool," says Comben. ▶

HOW DO MARKETERS USE BRAND EXPERIENCE?



Nike: retail outlets promote participation



Pret A Manger: its sandwich shops rise above the standard high-street experience

The use of brand experience seems to be growing: nearly half the marketers in the poll say their organisations are planning to spend more in this area over the next year, and only 6% expect to spend less.

About 30% of respondents, especially financial services firms, claim to have a dedicated brand experience resource. Even allowing for natural biases, such as the fact that survey respondents might be expected to have a greater awareness of the subject, this still suggests brand experience is becoming more popular.

The importance of brand experience is marked in the food and drink sector. "Because it allows you to develop a much closer relationship with your consumers, it is second only to media spend in terms of investment," says Philip Pick, Strongbow brand manager at HP Bulmer.

Brand experience is used mainly with consumers and to a somewhat lesser extent with business-to-business work. But there are signs that it is valued for internal marketing as well.

Connecting staff with brands is seen as important, not just for retention and recruitment, but also in delivering better experiences to customers. That is especially the case in the media sector, where the internal audience is ranked higher than the business audience.

Marketers identified a number of familiar names as leading exponents of brand experience. Nike received particular praise for its use of the slogan 'Just do it', which suggests personal involvement and brings consumers of

all sporting abilities into the brand. Niketown stores also help to encourage participation. Each week, the Niketown store in Boston in the US hosts a running club for as many as 80 people, who chat about the brand while running.

Another brand to receive high praise is Pret A Manger for its success in creating a customer experience that enables it to rise above the plethora of sandwich bars and coffee shops in the high street. "It stands out," says Ventura Works' Comben. "You always get what you want and the staff are always friendly."

Car manufacturers are frequently mentioned as good examples of brand experience, not just for their advertising,

but for smaller details too, such as showrooms.

Stella Artois' brand experience activity is widely praised. It has built on its TV film sponsorship by running giant outdoor cinemas and bars. These provide opportunities to sample the brand as well as unusual entertainment.

And the easyGroup brand is seen as developing experience by using the communications technique it has established with its airline across all its services. It is particularly noteworthy how the company uses different elements of the marketing mix together, including design, irreverent ads and effective use of PR.

Which phrase best fits your understanding of brand experience?

A way of connecting brands and people using emotional and sensory triggers	3.8
Any form of interactive communication between brands and consumers	3.5
A live face-to-face representation of the brand	2.9
A way of conducting genuine dialogue with consumers	2.6
A form of customer relationship management	2.5

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by *Marketing* and RPM. Ranking: 5-best fit, 1-worst fit

What are the most important elements of brand experience, by sector?

Element	Financial services	Travel and leisure	Food and drink	Media
A designed environment	3.7	3.5	3.4	3.8
Face-to-face communications	3.7	3.6	3.9	3.6
Live theatre/entertainment	2.1	2.9	3.5	2.9
Demonstration/education	3.6	3.5	3.9	3.1
Audio-visual technology	3.6	3.3	2.2	3.3
Personal participation	4.2	4.1	4.1	4.3
Product trial	4.5	3.8	4.5	3.5
Sensory triggers	2.9	3.4	3.4	3.4
Visual imagery	4.2	4.5	4.3	3.9

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by *Marketing* and RPM. Ranking: 5-highly suitable, 1-not very suitable

Respondents with dedicated brand experience department in their firm

Sector	%
Financial services	80
Food and drink	33
Media	33
Travel and leisure	18

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by *Marketing* and RPM

What are the most important audiences for brand experiences, by sector?

Audience	Financial services	Travel and leisure	Food and drink	Media
Consumers	4.7	4.8	5.0	4.8
Businesses	4.0	4.0	3.8	3.9
Employees	3.7	3.9	3.6	4.1

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by *Marketing* and RPM. Ranking: 5-highly important, 1-not very important



Smart: created a strong brand personality from its launch through a 'streetwise' tour

While marketers may have different ideas about what constitutes brand experience, they are largely united on its benefits. Above all, they say, it enables them to stand out from rivals when products and services are close on price and function.

As consumers become ever more promiscuous, creating pleasant associations helps ensure customers stay loyal instead of chasing a better deal.

"We want to stand out from other accounting firms," says Simon Davies, business development manager at Haslers. "People come to us because of the level of service. We want people to know what we stand for, and differentiation should be part of any brand experience project."

Transforming perceptions

Companies can also use brand experience to change perceptions. One media company respondent says their company has tended to be seen as a monolithic organisation, but now uses the medium to change its image among younger people. High on the list of objectives for this sector is satisfying a growing demand for more entertaining marketing solutions.

Given the importance of product trial and promotions, experience is represented as a better way of putting the product in the consumer's hand.

"Initially we wanted to recruit customers," says Strongbow brand manager Philip Pick. "Now we are trying to increase weekly drinkers, getting those who are already predisposed to the brand to use it more often."

Driving sales is seen as the ultimate objective, although brand experience can work to achieve that on various levels, from sampling outside supermarkets to taking a test drive.

Another example might be an open day at a university, where students get a direct experience of the service that helps narrow their shortlist. "It brings our brand closer to the consumer," says Anthony Crampton, deputy marketing manager at the University

of Glamorgan. These 'bonding' factors are ranked high across all sectors.

Most respondents feel experience elements should be applied throughout a brand's life. But one-quarter say it should be applied mainly in early growth, as the rapid development of personality and creation of emotional associations can jump-start a brand.

Several cite the examples of BMW Mini and Smart, which both had brand experience built around them from launch to create strong personalities.

The Smart car was developed as a lifestyle product, making owners feel they belonged to a select group and strengthening their relationship with the brand. When it was launched in summer 2001, the Smart streetwise tour took it to ten UK city centres. A fleet of cars and a branded coach provided displays, and consumers were encouraged to book test drives, while being provided with refreshments. The tour resulted in 494 test drives and more than 1800 sales leads.

Similarly, the Mini and the VW Beetle are both strong in the brand experience area. Their revivals owe a lot to a high level of nostalgia, which has enabled them to move straight toward a more experiential platform.

But in most cases, developing brand experience around an existing brand is seen as more difficult, since there can be negative associations to dispel as well as positive ones to build on. Here, experiential elements might be added gradually, perhaps focusing on specific elements, such as encouraging trial of line extensions.

In the drinks sector, brand experience is used to stimulate established brands. Martini uses it to bring back lapsed drinkers to the fold, and to encourage existing ones to increase their spend. The approach is to stage sampling events to highlight ways in which Martini can be consumed. "Experience is important for a brand in a mature sector," says Herbert. "It's about enticing consumers back into drinking more regularly."

What do you believe is driving the growth of brand experience?

Desire for sustainable brand differentiation	4.5
Need to bring the brand and the consumer closer together	4.3
Need to integrate with consumers' lifestyles	4.0
Desire for genuine dialogue with consumers	3.8
Consumer demand for more entertaining marketing solutions	3.8
Consumer demand for more relevant marketing solutions	3.7
Accountability of brand experience as a marketing technique	3.7
Consumer mistrust of spin and advertising	3.6
Ineffectiveness of traditional marketing communications	3.3
High cost of traditional marketing communications	3.3

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by Marketing and RPM. Ranking: 5-best fit, 1-worst fit

WHAT TECHNIQUES ARE AVAILABLE?



HP Bulmer: the drinks manufacturer links its Strongbow cider brand to music festivals and clubs in Ibiza to target a youth audience

Marketers rate as many as ten different techniques as playing a role in brand experience, with relatively little difference between them. Many also point out that boundaries are blurred, as many are used in combination.

Product trial is rated the most important tool, with retail and point-of-purchase activity in third place, reflecting the importance of getting goods into the consumer's hand.

But design, above-the-line advertising and even direct marketing also feature strongly, elements that do not at first sight have much to do with creating experience. For instance, an automotive firm draws attention to the way a sophisticated pack can enhance the image of its premium models.

More in tune with the classical definition is the relatively high weighting given to live events, something that experiential specialists see as an ideal means of creating memorable experiences.

That is particularly important to car manufacturers, which often depend on racing sponsorship to enhance their brand and give it greater credibility. One car company devises events for owners

of different brands, such as golf days and off-road events, that reflect their individual lifestyles.

Above all, marketers value live events as a way of getting closer to their target audience. HP Bulmer uses music festivals to promote Strongbow to 18- to 24-year-old dance consumers, and also takes the brand out to clubs in Ibiza.

American Express held a golfing event in Hyde Park to launch its Green Card, with Tiger Woods acting as a draw and ensuring media coverage.

Events work well with other elements when they are a focal point of PR that can be used to create wider coverage. Building product trial into events also enables data to be gathered. "I would call it experiential marketing: mainly sampling, but locking in with the direct mail campaign," says Martini marketing manager Catherine Herbert.

Different sectors place varying degrees of emphasis on the techniques available. Marketers in financial services rank above-the-line ads ahead of product trial, whereas in travel and leisure, advertising at point of purchase is most important.

For the media, design and live events come out highest, and in food and drinks,

product trial is ranked highly, with POP activity second.

Online marketing lacks the personal contact that appears to be the main driver of brand experience, but even this has its place. HP Bulmer is using it in the development of internet communities around Strongbow. "We can use online to make the campaign feel bigger and introduce it to more people," says Strongbow brand manager Philip Pick. "And by creating an online community, we can keep the dialogue going."

Respondents ranked live outdoor events and shopping centres as the best environments for brand experience campaigns. But here, too, there were sector variations.

Financial services rates consumer's homes and the high street as the most important places for interaction with their brands, whereas travel and leisure firms rank shopping centres first, followed by supermarkets and exhibition venues.

Food and drinks companies rate supermarkets the most important, while for media companies, the best places to activate brand experience are shopping centres and bars, pubs and clubs.

Which environments are most appropriate for executing brand experience, by sector?

Environment	Financial services	Travel and leisure	Food and drink	Media
Factories	2.0	2.6	2.5	2.1
Live outdoor events	3.7	2.9	4.0	3.7
Bars/pubs/clubs	3.6	3.2	3.7	3.9
High street	3.9	3.5	3.6	3.7
Shopping centres	3.8	3.6	4.1	3.9
Supermarkets	3.7	3.5	4.2	3.7
Cinemas/leisure venues	3.5	3.4	3.3	3.5
Museums/permanent visitor attractions	2.7	3.2	2.6	2.9
Offices	2.6	3.0	3.6	2.5
Airports/railway stations	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.3
Hotels	2.7	3.2	3.2	2.9
Conferences/exhibition venues	3.0	3.5	2.9	2.7
In the home	3.9	2.5	3.5	2.9

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by Marketing and RPM. Ranking: 5-best fit, 1-worst fit

Which marketing techniques are most effective for executing brand experience, by sector?

Technique	Financial services	Travel and leisure	Food and drink	Media
Above-the-line advertising	4.1	3.5	3.2	3.5
Design	3.7	3.6	3.9	4.1
Direct marketing	3.5	3.4	2.9	3.5
Live events	3.1	3.5	3.9	4.0
Online marketing	3.3	3.3	2.7	2.9
Exhibitions	2.7	3.2	2.8	3.1
Product trial	4.0	3.9	4.5	4.1
Public relations	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.9
Retail/point of purchase	3.8	4.5	4.1	3.8
Sponsorship	3.4	3.3	3.5	3.7

Source: 'Experience Counts', commissioned by Marketing and RPM. Ranking: 5-best fit, 1-worst fit