

Brand *the* Experience

Think about the last time you tried to meet up with a friend in a favorite, popular restaurant. From within the crowd, you look for what makes that person special.

You might look for her curly hair, try to remember what jacket she often wears or glance towards the table where she usually sits. You might even listen for her voice in the hope that she recognizes you first and calls your name. Certainly, the more you know about her, the easier she is to spot. Seems obvious enough.

The same is true for the “sea of sameness” that strikes a person at retail who is looking for a specific brand. She looks for the undeniable signs of that brand, which in most cases is limited to packaging, a little merchandising and perhaps a familiar location.

Where would great brands be without the shoppers who buy them?

There are certainly not many opportunities to stand out. So, we would argue that great branding is more important than ever in today’s retail environment and that experiential branding—branding that you can feel with your senses—is the future.

Experiential branding is the future because it connects emotionally with the consumer and the shopper at relevant moments in their lives. The result is increased demand, and growing sales.

We need to evolve our definition of the brand’s identity to include the shopper’s identity—the shopper’s life—and make sure that the brand is fully aligned

with what’s relevant to her at every given moment, and especially at the moment she’s deciding whether to buy your brand.

It’s time we put more energy behind making sure the shopping experience is an indelible part of the brand experience.

Experiential branding is primarily built upon three principles:

1. Understand your brand’s past greatness to capture its true voice. It’s been said that you can see the future by looking into the eyes of the past. The same is true for branding. Never underestimate the importance of digging into a brand’s genealogy to create an ownable voice for the future.

Understanding where the brand came from, what in its history made it unique and what it still prides itself on today can provide invaluable information.

Apple’s translation of its brand experience to retail is easily the best example of how this can work. Lots of marketers talk about Apple, but few have truly followed its lead, especially the experience it creates at retail.

Apple didn’t just hang a shingle and start selling its products. It created a holistic retail environment that built upon the brand’s long history of creating user-friendly products with cool styling. Perhaps most significantly, its Genius Bar is there to help its customers, often in moments of crisis.

2. Diagnose your brand’s current health and make its differentiation relevant in today’s environment. Differentiation is often called “the engine of the brand train.” It is the source of a brand’s competitive advantage. The challenge is to keep that difference relevant to consumers in the present situation.

Amstel Light offers a great example of how this can be done. As the “beer drinker’s light beer,” the position clearly captured the brands “great light beer taste” until beer sales flattened due to growing wines and white spirits.

Repositioning the beer as “the wine drinker’s



SOURCE: TracyLocke

beer” leveraged its great taste to a whole new, growing market. It also offered a new experience that changed possible media choices from traditional advertising in *Sports Illustrated* to being with the “in” crowd at experiential happenings such as Fashion Week.

3. Create your brand’s experience for the future in a way that can be maximized at retail.

Understanding what business the brand is really in is the key to expressing an idea that people can experience. This has never been more important for Williams Sonoma, which, like a lot of other retailers finds itself in an extremely challenging situation.

But rather than succumb to traditional retail tactics like price promotions or stacking it high and hoping it will fly, this retailer decided to embrace its shoppers with all five senses and remind shoppers that Williams Sonoma isn’t just a store, it’s a place for cooks.

Their “Taste the Best of Summer” campaign involves cooking demonstrations, sampling programs with special summertime food, drinks and ideas that celebrate the things everybody loves about summer. Most important, Williams Sonoma is taking a long-term view at a time when short-term pressures are incredibly intense.

So, how do these principles of experiential branding apply to your brand, in your situation? It’s a relatively simple matter of helping shoppers think about, consider, and choose items by reframing categories, departments, products and benefits.

We’ve found it’s helpful to take the shopper’s view through a Maslow-like hierarchy of needs (*see above*). The concept is to begin at the bottom of the triangle and understand shoppers along their path to purchase. Based on that, you determine the optimal

navigation, or wayfinding. Then you determine what the ideal experience is, and how to translate that to a planogram — from 30 feet, 10 feet, and three feet.

At 30 feet, you’ve got to influence what shoppers see, at 10 feet it’s what they feel and three feet you’ve got to understand how she thinks and appeal to that. While this does mean considering pricing and adjacencies, it also means developing simple, sensory, intuitive hierarchies based on what shoppers need at that moment, and how they are thinking.

It’s no longer enough to limit the brand experience to the product itself. You need to ensure that your brand is relevant to shoppers, too. If what you’ve created engages shoppers with all five senses, holds their attention long enough to convert them, then you are branding experientially.

And if you are branding experientially, you are growing sales. ■



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