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Over the Waterfall in a Barrel: Experiential Marketing and the Building of Brand

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Abstract

Experiential marketing has evolved in response to a move away from a service economy to an economy that is shaped and defined by consumer experiences. As consumers seek ever more unique and memorable experiences, experiential marketing has become increasingly important in establishing and building brand identity in sectors as diverse as retail, events marketing and more recently the leisure and tourism sector. This paper aims to critically assess the validity of an experiential marketing approach in the formation and communication of brand identity. The analytical basis for the evaluation is a single case study involving the development of MONA, a hedonistic experience brand based in Australia.

Keywords

Experiential marketing; Brand experience; Brand identity; Hedonism

Experiential Marketing

Whilst experiential marketing is a relatively new phenomenon, as early as 1982 Holbrook and Hirschman highlighted the need to move away from conceptualising consumer behaviour purely in terms of information processing and a subjective experience, and yet most of the literature up to the late 1990s has perpetuated this cognitive approach. Marketing in the leisure and tourism sector has tended to be product or supply focused, with a lack of recognition of the role and expectations of the consumer as an active, skilled and discerning participant in the consumption process. Traditional models of consumption have tended to treat consumer behaviour somewhat narrowly, as a rational, problem solving process rather than considering the more hedonistic reasons behind consumption decisions. Consequently, an experiential view of consumer decision making may be a better representation of consumer choice where less tangible, hedonistic variables may be significant predictors of behaviour (Leighton 2007). The twenty first century consumer demands a value-for-money and worthwhile experience but expects at the same time to be 'entertained, stimulated, emotionally and creatively challenged' (Schmitt, 2000).

Understanding the term 'experiential marketing' is potentially problematic due to diverse definitions of the concept, and in particular there is confusion between the use of experience as a verb and experience as a noun (Palmer 2008). However, the following definition of experiential marketing is offered for the purposes of this paper:

'when a person buys a service he purchases a set of intangible experiences carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages to engage him in a personal way' (Pine and Gilmore 1999 pp2)

Experiential marketing involves taking a product or service and amplifying it into a set of tangible, physical, interactive experiences that reinforce the offer and rather than seeing the offer through advertising media, consumers 'feel' it by being part of it. (Williams 2006).

Experience Branding

In terms of branding, Brakus et al (2009) define brand experience as ‘subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings and cognitions) as well as behavioural responses evoked by brand related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications and environment’. Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) suggest that brand experience comprises a number of dimensions, including sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural and that the extent to which these dimensions can be evoked will determine the intensity of the brand experience. Their recent study profiles consumers along these four dimensions in order to ascertain whether different groups of consumers prefer different experiential appeals. The resultant typology reveals five groupings: holistic consumers who are interested in all aspects of the experience; utilitarian consumers who attach little importance to brand experience; hedonistic consumers who are interested in sensorial gratification and emotions; action orientated consumers and inner directed consumers who focus on internal processes such as sensations, emotions and thoughts. These typologies are potentially highly significant for those organisations seeking to build experience brands targeted at hedonistic consumers, and suggest that organisations should emphasise the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the brand in order to appeal to these experiential consumers.

Hedonism and Experience Branding

Targeting hedonistic consumers with an experiential offering demands some understanding of the nature of hedonism. Popularly conceived as pleasure seeking, hedonism is nevertheless seen as an unsustainable experience (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2002), since it embodies notions of self-gratificatory sensuality and self indulgence that may ultimately lead to disappointment, restlessness and yet more conspicuous consumption (Rohatyn 1990). However, the potential for targeting hedonistic consumers with brands designed to deliver a rich experiential offering is an attractive proposition. The following case study provides an insight into this potential.

Research Design

The data for this case is drawn from a longitudinal project that is tracking the Australian brand MONA from its early stages, through to its opening, and on to a review once it has been operating for a year. An inductive research approach has been adopted and within this an exploratory design, utilising participant observation, interviews with key staff, analysis of corporate publications and media statements and data from social media sites such as blogs.

The Case of MONA

The case of Australia’s MONA is unusual in many respects. It is privately owned and funded by millionaire David Walsh, variously described by the Australian press as “a professional gambler”, a “rabid atheist”, and a “university drop-out and autodidact” (Coslovich 2007: 5). It is located in Hobart, the capital city of the island state of Tasmania, Australia, a long way from the art capitals of the world. More significantly MONA is the umbrella brand for a range of products that are aimed at the luxury brand consumer, the consumer that thinks little of travelling half way around the world for an unusual and memorable experience. MONA’s product range—wine, beer, art, accommodation, and music—is clearly aimed at those consumers seeking a hedonistic experience.

The acronym MONA stands for Museum of Old and New Art. The privately owned art museum—unusual in Australia’s museum sector—at the core of the corporate brand MONA has a significant though small collection (460 works housed in 65,000 square feet) and construction of the building has only recently been completed. It opened in January 2011 at a reputed cost of AU\$70 million (£39.5 million) with a collection valued at £63 million. Entrance is free and 50,000 people visited in the first three weeks alone. (The Sunday Times, 20.2.11).

MONA is much more than an art museum. Under the umbrella brand MONA sits, in some ways, the more obvious hedonistic products of Walsh’s vision. The original product of the corporate brand was Moorilla wine, now rebranded with a more ‘edgy’, more sophisticated positioning, complete with sensual branding. There is also the successful boutique beer brand Moo Brew, with labelling designed by Australian artist John Kelly and a distinctive and very non-beer champagne-shaped bottle. At the cellar door for both these products is a restaurant called The Source, named after artist John Olsen’s 6 metre work on the ceiling of the foyer. Four additional apartments for the luxury accommodation that features work from the art collection, designer furniture and controversial architecture. There are now 8 apartments collectively named The Pavilions on the edge of the Derwent River, each named after an artist or architect and costing AU\$7.6 million (£4.3 million). The final product within the MONA umbrella brand is MONA FOMA, or MOFO, a Festival of Music and Art—2010 was its second year. Curated by Brian Ritchie of the post-punk band the Violent Femmes, MOFO 2010 had John Cale, late of the influential band Velvet Underground and fresh from the 2009 Venice Biennale as its ‘eminent artist in residence’. The humorous and self-deprecating tone of the MONA statements regarding MOFO can be illustrated thus:

‘MONA FOMA is back for the second year and promises to be almost as good as the first. It also promises to take itself even less seriously’ (MONA 2009).

Findings

MONA is a work in progress. The art museum itself has been described as ‘*the most exciting addition to the Australian cultural landscape since the Sydney Opera House*’(The Sunday Times 20.2.11) and word of its success is spreading fast. Some of the other products within the MONA brand are only now just starting to take on their hedonistic form having been something of a legacy in need of rebranding. New products such as MOFO have quickly taken hold within Australia as distinctive and innovative cultural icons. For the future, though, MONA needs to make its mark internationally. The market for luxury brands is relatively small, particularly in a country with a population the size of Australia’s. It might be said that the market for MONA’s hedonistic experiences is even smaller. Also important is the fact art and cultural organisations need to be product driven. If they are not they risk their artistic integrity, the very thing that challenges their target markets (Colbert 2007).

Who, then, is the target market that will take MONA into the future? David Walsh has been quoted as saying:

‘I want to target the world, but I want to target a very small percentage that might be interested in this subversive, adult kind of Disneyland... [they] might come from New York or Hobart, and if they come from New York, they’ll justify the long trip and fairly

large expense because the specific experience might have something to say to them' (cited in Strickland 2009: 38).

MONA has now started reaching out to the global hedonistic consumer – the London based *The Art Newspaper* ran an extensive feature in their July 2010 issue on MONA (Ruiz 2010), after a writer travelled to Tasmania for a personal tour of the facilities.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the notion that consumers are seeking unique and memorable experiences and that marketing strategies need to offer more than the traditional features and benefits view of consumers in order to target them effectively (Williams 2006). An experiential approach to marketing is proposed as a tool for building brand identity, involving a more postmodern approach to the consumer as an aesthete, an emotionally driven and discerning participant in the consumption process. Hedonistic consumers are identified as especially responsive to experiential marketing, since they are seen to respond well to emotional appeals. The case of MONA serves to illustrate the potential for experiential marketing to target a small but discerning segment of consumers, drawn to the unconventional and highly personal brand that exemplifies the unorthodox nature of its founder, David Walsh. As the longitudinal study progresses and the brand continues to develop, so the full range of possibilities for the brand will continue to emerge.

Meanwhile, the programme for MOFO 2011, the arts and cultural festival that was ‘the drum roll to the opening of MONA’ promised amongst other things to ‘solicit your discord’ and ‘exploit your sense of fun’ (MONA 2010). As experiential marketing appeals go, at the very least it is intriguing and for hedonistic consumers potentially irresistible.

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