

DEEP IMPACT



Event marketers move beyond the experiential to immersive strategies

By Corrie Dosh
corrie.dosh@nielsen.com

If you happened to be in Times Square last March, you might have caught sight of something odd even for N.Y.C.

something where the guest or attendee interacts with whatever is being demonstrated or shown," Givner says.

Teams of marketing agency professionals were running around the city, pretending to be young women helping a 20-something-year-old friend, late for a party and needing a spectacular new outfit, Twittering to friends on Facebook about their progress, and, oh yes, thrilled about how a new Dove lotion kept their skin soft.

It wasn't mass psychosis—it was an emerging form of event-based marketing, an immersion event, that put attendees in the shoes of the target demographic.

Paint The Town Red (PTTR), a New York City-based event marketing company, won acclaim and a 2008 International Special Events Society Esprit Award for best meeting or conference program with a budget of under \$75,000 for the event to educate Unilever marketing executives and their brand agency on new Dove-brand products. The format of an immersion event was the extra-special touch that the company needed to make the product education memorable and unique, says Howard Givner, founder of PTTR and now CEO for North America after the company was acquired by international event production company Global Events in June.

"An experiential event is

"We think of an immersion event as taking that to the next level, and really letting the client do a deep dive into what it's like to be the target demographic."

GIRL POWER

The goal of the Unilever planning meeting was for the marketing executives to learn more about the target demographic—women in their 20s—and to come up with nontraditional strategies to market Dove products with emerging media like social networking sites.

"Rather than a demo, we created a story line," Givner says. "It was about five or six girlfriends in their mid-20s that all went to school together. They were getting together that night for one girl's birthday party, who was named Sarah."

The teams were given an envelope, which contained a printout of an e-mail from one of the characters asking for a favor. The girl had spilled coffee on her dress and needed her friend to swing by clothing outlet H&M to pick out a new party dress and to e-mail a photo back for approval. Once a team sent off the required picture, they received a new text asking for the character to



meet up with a friend named Susan in Starbucks, a part played by a PTTR actress. The teams then visited Sarah's MySpace page to learn her likes and dislikes, and then perused Match.com to find her a date for the party. The teams were ultimately directed to travel to Times Square to shoot a YouTube video of them singing "Happy Birthday" to Sarah.

"It was a combination of throwing them into these technologies, getting them on YouTube and Facebook and MySpace, and after two hours, we brought them back and did the debriefing," Givner says. "I was sitting there cracking up because they really felt like they got to know a fictional character. I mean—we made this person up! And [the attendees] really walked out of the event feeling like they got an insight into women in their 20s in urban America and the different types of nontraditional media and technologies that they use. It was very different than sitting through a PowerPoint."

The event was so successful, Givner says, that the marketing team adopted the idea and much of the story line a year later when they launched a campaign of "Webisodes" featuring Alicia Keys to promote Dove products.

"The proof is in the pudding," Givner says. "The program was impactful and was instrumental. It's one thing to show someone how something works, and it's another to show them how the buyer or consumer will actually use [a new technology] in the real world."

LIVING THE LIFE

Immersion events go beyond crafting an event around a product and take attendees deeper into the lifestyle of the customer, says Jennifer Gerich, founding partner of Los Angeles-based event production company Campos Creative Works (CCW). CCW has designed high-impact events for clients including Land Rover, Microsoft, and Toyota.

For a Land Rover event in 2003, CCW was asked to design

Unilever sent their marketing team to N.Y.C. and immersed them into a modern city girl's life...



a new Range Rover product launch that would be distinct from what other car companies were doing, and to keep the brand on the radar screen of its target high-end customers. CCW arranged "adrenaline adventures" for likely Range Rover customers at six different high-end resorts around the country, including properties in Montauk, NY; Sea Island, GA; Kohler, WI; and Dallas.

"These were one-on-one immersive experiences; two- to two-and-a-half-hour experiences," says CCW Director of Strategic Development Jennifer Beindorf. "There were off-road courses, and attendees hung out at the resorts and did various lifestyle experiences like culinary adventures, orchid care, falconry, and skeet shooting with rare rifles."



Attendees stayed well beyond the expected length of the event, and attendance numbers were double the projected 300 at each resort, Beindorf says. The strategy was to target the lifestyle of the intended consumer, rather than to simply show off the vehicles and offer a test drive.

"There are three key areas for these types of events," she says: "consumer immersion; location—which is key—you have to be where the guest already wants to be; and it has to be an authentic fit."

An immersion event was a fit for Range Rover because it matched "unique adventures with a unique brand," Beindorf says, and allowed the company to reach its experience-seeking customers.



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But immersion events are not necessarily limited to product launches and consumer events, Gerich says. CCW did another immersion event eight years ago for Lincoln Mercury that was intended to educate employees and dealers on a rebrand-

ing effort to transform Lincoln into "American Luxury."

"Instead of passive education, facilitators, and presentations, we took the approach of coming up with an active way to get employees to 'live the life' of the customers," Gerich says.

CCW created a shopping experience for attendees where they were asked to choose products that reflected American luxury and differentiate between other products on display that were considered "old money" or "new money."

"By attendees actively going through it, we could measure if they were really 'getting it.'" Gerich says. "It's instant ROI."

The event was first launched with 300 internal employees and then expanded to a major dealer meeting after some adjustments. Attendees were also allowed to pick from a selection of off-site lifestyle experiences that reflected the theme.

The key concern for CCW in planning these types of events is a "realistic budget," Gerich says, adding that she doesn't mean unlimited funds.

"You can be just as creative on a

small budget," she says. "It's really about how you embrace it."

One CCW immersion event on a reasonable budget created product zones at the International Motorcycle Show in partnership with Toyota and Saatchi LA that showed in 13 cities nationwide. Sue Stahl, a client advocate for CCW who worked on the event, says the challenge was to draw in motorcycle enthusiasts attending the show to see

the new Toyota vehicles without appearing crass and commercial. Stahl says 89 percent of the foot traffic through the zone stayed to experience the Toyota products, creating a measurable ROI. Famed motorcycle designer Roland Sands signed autographs, and attendees had a photo op on one of his custom-designed bikes. A Toyota Tundra in the middle of the exhibit showed off customized features available on the truck and promoted Toyota's branding efforts.

Attendees were also able to design their own helmet and play *Guitar Hero*, a video game that appealed to the target consumer audience.

"We did as much as we could to understand the audience and vehicles," Stahl says, "to create an experience for a very specific, measurable result."

POWERFUL IMPACT

While the concept of immersion events has been around for a while, they are becoming

increasingly popular, a trend Paint The Town Red's Givner attributes to the rise of technologies like TiVo and e-media that make consumers harder to reach for marketers.

"Events like this are a formal part of the marketing mix now," he says. "With things like TiVo and satellite radio, a lot of people aren't listening to commercials. They're also getting a lot of information from the Internet. So there's a trend of consumers being harder to reach, and events are a high-impact way to reach consumers."

With the variety of communication channels now available to marketers, the typical marketing infrastructure at most companies cannot keep up with new developments, Givner adds. So internal training events also benefit from nontraditional approaches like immersion. They're a crash course in not only how these new communication technologies work, but also how consumers use them.

"Usually in the past, marketers were leading the consumers. They were driving how they wanted you to think about the brand," says Givner. "And with all this social communication now, the consumers in many cases are ahead of the marketers." ■

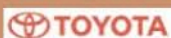


Range Rover staged customer lifestyle experiences at six resorts



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