

OPINION Adam Whittaker: Experiential Marketing – let's get serious

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Numerous recent surveys have shown experiential marketing to be growing in both spend and client interest.



EVENTS:review reported on the MICE Group 2006 survey of senior brand marketers within the UK, Germany, France and the US. The survey concluded that experiential marketing will be the biggest growth area of the communications mix in the next five years.

Our own UK research (Reardon Smith Whittaker's [RSW] New Business Survey Sept 2006) of over 150 senior marketers from a broad spectrum of businesses was no less remarkable. Sixty one percent of those surveyed named experiential as the marketing communication discipline they were "most interested in" at present, closely followed by the related areas of buzz and word of mouth at 43%. By comparison search engine marketing, itself the subject of much attention recently, lagged behind at 36%.

Hostage of fortune

But in RSW's experience working with agencies, I hear things to suggest corporate clients are not yet organised to get the most from the discipline or see it at its best. In particular, I feel the time has come for companies to take the discipline more seriously in both their marketing planning and budgetary planning.

I often see live marketing budgets fall out of a generic below-the-line (BTL) appropriation. Experiential becomes a hostage to fortune, the budget determined by whatever may or may not be left in the pot. Objectives meanwhile do not get changed to reflect this, leading to unrealistic and unfulfilled expectations.

The tendency to budget from the BTL pot has other negative consequences. Live marketing is the last to be considered and very late in the day. This limits what can be done in the time available. The agency won't have the necessary lead-time to get the best venue, sufficient build time for a great set or the kind of sourcing and briefing time to deliver quality, well trained staff. Ergo, recipe for disappointment all round.

Lacking the right skills

Sales promotion agencies are the custodians of below-the-line budgets so these companies have tended to pick up a lot of experiential work. As if to prove the point, there has been a growth in experiential 'supply agencies' that service this market – often handling little or no direct client business. On the face of it this arrangement may work perfectly well. Yet I do know of experiential campaigns kept in-house (read keeping the budgets) by promotions agencies lacking the skills of true experiential practitioners.

Talking about skills and experience segues conveniently to my last point. The problems I describe are exacerbated when experiential marketing decisions are taken mostly by inexperienced, junior client marketers – people not best equipped to manage the kinds of challenges the circumstances create.

As the discipline is growing faster than ever is there not a case for experiential planning to be considered earlier? Shouldn't more senior marketers make these judgements sooner and stay closer to the execution process thereafter? Should we not be hearing about 'experiential budgets' in the same way that advertising, direct marketing and digital all command their own budget allocations?

I think the answers to these questions are yes, yes and yes. Then we'd have even better and more creative campaigns working ever harder to deliver outstanding ROI.

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