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## EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING IN THE AGE OF THE CORONAVIRUS



***With social distancing becoming the new norm, Dr K Rajeshwari, Senior Associate Professor, Marketing, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai tells us how experiential marketing is being redefined***

**Can anything be experiential anymore?**

Experiential Marketing is redefining itself. Due to the constraints such as social distancing and limited outdoor movements imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, marketers are forced to find alternative ways of giving a personalized experience to the user.

In December 2019, Agency EA, the Chicago-based brand experience agency, published a research study on a number of Fortune 500 companies that revealed that 87% of their marketers had invested in some form of experiential marketing in order to reach their consumers. This was done through various initiatives: from brand awareness and registrations to product demonstrations and offer-based free trials.

Experiencing a brand positively before purchase improves ‘word-of-mouth’ marketing significantly, leading to a reduction in promotional expenditure for the brand. One can also get real-time feedback through experiential marketing, which is invaluable. Even when the ROI of such an experiential activity is difficult to gauge, marketers still perceive huge advantages in using this form of marketing.

The various types of experiential marketing strategies include

- (1) Event marketing where events are held and live audience interaction is done with the brand
- (2) Brand field activation that aims to keep the brand promise alive in the minds of consumers
- (3) Guerilla marketing which unexpectedly surprises the consumers with a chance to experience the brand in an unplanned manner and
- (4) Retail installations, where the product is showcased to and/or sampled by the potential user.

The common thread across these strategies is ‘people interface’, which has become tricky, in this current situation.

### **So, how can marketers overcome this challenge?**

The creativity of marketers and agencies is at stake here. Digital technology has to be combined with human-touch experiences to create the desired effect. Instead of ‘one-to-many’ interactions, marketers now will need to make their interaction with their audience more personalized through ‘one-to-one’ interaction, which will drive up the promotional budget. Any opportunity to interact with the consumers should be grabbed; whether it is through tele-advice, supplying product knowledge, answering queries etc. These targeted messages must also be matched by the brand’s credible ability to deliver on them. However, the end goal remains the same – to create memorable interactions that effectively spread brand awareness, encourage trial and facilitate dialogue with current and prospective customers.

Other methods of experiential marketing include creating mobile tours or performing virtual logins to offer a visual experience. Some leading Singaporean universities have used such methods, as a part of their undergraduate admissions process, to attract prospective students. Another effective example is that of HDFC Bank launching their ATMs in residential complexes and giving the residents a convenient, digital experience, thereby encouraging enrolment. Another relevant industry for this type of marketing is high-end luxury automobiles. Car manufacturers tend to utilize a dual approach. Traditional showrooms are located in rich agri-belt areas. In the big and emerging metros, car manufacturers engage in a completely

different type of marketing. For instance, MG Motors have smaller showrooms in the cities, with digital driving experience. This combined experiential method is to give the prospective buyer the complete virtual experience at home and help them make the final decision to purchase the car. Imagine someone instructing you on how to navigate, through a screen, while explaining the car features!

Experiential marketing can also build deeper relationships with loyal customers and this is quite possibly the time for that. Speaking to them in detail about the product experience, their pain points and proactively offering solutions for those problems is a great way to keep the customer satisfied. Instead of communicating through the traditional call centre system, imagine a customer's surprise if he is given the option of a live video call. The video creates a human connection, and the company shows they care and their willingness to prioritize the quality of the interaction over call-volume efficiency.

Emotion is the key and the connection between people and brands. The current hiatus emerging from the Covid-19 situation should not be allowed to create a vacuum in the minds of consumers. The pandemic is teaching us a great deal about customer interactions and relationship building. Human touch is at a premium during this time of crisis and cannot be compromised.

The most memorable marketing campaign is the one that exhibits emotional intelligence and communicates with care, honesty, and empathy, and as a result, builds customer trust in the brand. Therefore, agencies and brands that engage in experiential marketing will have to find creative and personalized ways of delivering that emotional experience to the customers during the pandemic through virtual means, so it will be 'digital with a human touch'.