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Putting the Experiences into Experiences Marketing

■ Introduction

In order to understand how experiences marketing needs to differ from other forms of marketing, we first need to identify why THEF plays such a significant role in contemporary society and so, as a consequence, why its marketing requires special attention. Just as THEF reflect social and cultural movements, so does its marketing. As the western world has moved from what may be defined as the era of modernity into the era of post-industrialisation/modernity, this shift has been accompanied by certain social, cultural and economic traits that have resulted in a restructuring of society (Harvey, 1989, Lash and Urry, 1994). It is argued that this has led to a period of 'social (dis)-organization' (Franklin and Crang, 2001:7). This 'social (dis)-organization' can be seen to be the result of an alleged fragmentation of society and culture (Harvey, 1989). We now live in a society that is dominated by the media, traditional communities have broken up, trends are fleeting, our lives change very quickly, and this has resulted in feelings of uncertainty. As a result of these feelings we have turned to activities that provide comfort and meaning. Contemporary experiences marketing frames these activities within the marketing language and processes of food, tourism, hospitality and food.

Additionally, experiences marketing reflects the social and cultural movements that circulate contemporary society, and draws on discourses, rituals and trends to create a complex form of marketing practice that offers the entry into dreamscapes and marketingscapes, in which emotions and the needs of the consumer are met by utilising a range of marketing strategies, conventions and representations. This is what differentiates experiences marketing from other forms of marketing. Before the significance and meaning of experiences marketing can be charted, it is important to identify themes that have emerged from the shift to the post-industrial/modern era as experiences marketing can be perceived as both the result of these themes, and as a reaction to them. For authors such as Eco (1990) and Foucault (1987), the contemporary world is dominated by signs, to the point that the individual's social and cultural location is governed by 'simulational' (Foucault, 1987) and 'hyperreal' (Eco, 1990) relations. As Baudrillard asserts:

The era of simulation is everywhere initiated by the interchangeability of previously contradictory and dialectical terms...the inter-changeability of the beautiful and the ugly in fashion; of the right and the left in politics; of the true and false in every media message; of the useful and useless at the level of objects; and of nature and culture at every level of meaning. All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilisation of moral, civic and practical judgement, vanish in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable. (1993:128)

The result of this for the individual is that the relationship between the signified and signifier becomes blurred, for example, as a reaction to the economic downturn that followed the credit crunch of 2008, food retailers in the UK introduced 'basic' ranges that included smoked salmon and extra virgin olive oil etc., thus blurring the boundaries between luxury and utilitarian categories of food. The Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas offers you the opportunity to sit down outside the Coliseum drinking a cappuccino while the Roman sunset romantically sets every twenty minutes. This version of the world becomes central to the discourse that creates the foundations of experiences marketing.

The continued globalisation and preoccupation with signs, brands and the media within contemporary society has led to a type of spatial dislocation. For Jameson:

this latest mutation in space – post-modern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organise its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. (1991:44)

According to Jameson people no longer know where they are; they are lost both socially and spatially in the processes of the de-differentiation that surrounds culture and society. Experiences marketing is a consequence of this de-differentiation, as it plays representations of time, place, emotions, relationships, destinations and experiences by creating a dreamscape in which the consumer can escape everyday life. Mike Featherstone comments that:

If we examine the definitions of postmodernism, we find an emphasis on the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and playful mixing of codes. (1991:65)

The outcome of this de-differentiation is a breakdown in the distinctiveness of each area of social and cultural activity; each area implodes into one another bringing at every opportunity, spectacle or play. The impact of this on the consumer is that the relationship between the world represented in experiences marketing and the real world become blurred. A good example of this is where tourism marketing presents images of destinations, beaches or attractions that are completely devoid of signs of modernity such as cars or telegraph poles. This emptying of markers of development, people or technology has the effect of providing the consumer with greater freedom to find individual meaning within the interpretation process. This is achieved in experiences marketing by utilising a collage of words and images that creates a very specific language of experiences (This will be further discussed in Chapter 8).