Experiential marketing: a way to get people talking

Take a motorcycle: Is it a product, or is it an experience? If it's the latter, something lived on the open road, word of mouth is more likely to spread the message. This marketing trick now has research to back it, with a caveat.



May 30, 2019

The idea that it's more rewarding to spend money on experiences than material goods has

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gained cachet in recent years. And so too has the trend for framing products *as* experiences.

Some purchases (e.g., meals at restaurants) naturally lend themselves to being seen as experiences. Others, like bottled water, can be positioned in various ways. Do you highlight the H2O's purity and mineral concentrations? Then it's a material good. But a picture of the world seen afresh after drinking the target brand is an experience.

Iñigo Gallo and **Inés Alegre** of IESE, with Claudia Townsend of the University of Miami, explore the benefits (with a caveat) to be reaped from experiential marketing. They build on research which suggests that when a product is framed as an experience, consumers consider this product to align closer to their sense of self. Gallo et al. then show that this perceived closeness to self leads to more personal reviews and more word-of-mouth marketing.

Testing marketing techniques

The authors mounted a trio of experiments to test ads' experiential frames, "closeness to self" and how that inspired consumers to leave reviews (i.e., word of mouth) to be read by other potential consumers.

Experiment one analyzed existing reviews for products on Amazon, and concluded that products that are framed experientially receive many more reviews. This effect was true even between products in the same category: yes, diapers framed experientially received more reviews than diapers framed as products.

Two more experiments presented participants with experience- and product-focused ads and asked them how likely they would be to write a review of whatever was being sold. Again, experientially framed products were much more likely to be reviewed by consumers, regardless of whether the experience was good or bad, they were familiar with the brand or they had expertise in the category.

Practical advice

The authors add a note of caution to would-be experiential marketers: word of mouth can be a double-edged sword. That is, consumers appreciate peers' product reviews precisely because they aren't controlled by marketers. So, if the product doesn't stand up to scrutiny, there's a risk such techniques will generate a lot of negative testimony.

To sell your product on its experiential merits, taking on the risk of unvarnished reviews,

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here's how to structure an experiential advertisement:

- Focus on the use (rather than the product features).
- Use sensorial stimuli to evoke emotions and feelings (beautiful images).
- Highlight the social element of the purchase (positive experiences are about connection).

MORE INFO: "**Selling Experiences to Connect With Consumers**"

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