Arts organizations and the commercial sector alike face great challenges in the race to gain attention in the marketplace. Traditional methods are no longer effective in a world inundated by transmediations, where potential customers endure constant streams of advertising in many forms, and from every possible angle. The saturation of traditional (and even newer) communication channels has led many companies and organizations to experiment with innovative forms of marketing campaigns. Similarly, the age of the Internet has framed a global marketplace which provides endless choices of products, services, entertainment, and more. With so many options at our fingertips, “consumers now crave meaningful interaction with their chosen brands” (Ong, 2013). Experiential Marketing is an excellent tool to create just these sorts of interactions. Such strategies rise above the age-old objective of marketers to merely place products and services at the top of the consumer-choice food chain through carefully formulated and communicated imagery of quality and desire. Instead, experiential marketing is all about “empowering consumers to experience the benefits for themselves” (Ibid). Experiential marketing campaigns can take infinite forms, but the strategy is always the same: to create impactful experiences for consumers that increase visibility through the cultivation of powerful connections that will then lead to brand loyalty and a stronghold in a particular consumer culture (See Figure 1).

A strategy is a method, or structured plan of action (Matthews, 2013) that is well-calculated to accomplish a specific goal (Morton, 2013). Successful experiential marketing strategies produce campaigns that evoke emotion, demonstrate personal relevancy of the product, and clearly articulate the differentiation of the product from their competitors (DiMatteo, 2011). The key is to provide a full sensory experience that allows the consumer to engage with the brand and walk away with a lasting, positive impression. This strategy can be incredibly effective in both attracting new audiences, maintaining current ones, and transforming “regular” consumers into die-hard fans.
It goes without saying that experience is at the heart of experiential marketing. The purpose is to allow the audience to directly engage with the product. ‘Experience’ in the noun form is defined as “practical contact with and observation of facts or events” (Google), yet experiential marketing pushes this notion beyond an objective encounter. “Experience is an emotional and physical connection with an activity. It elicits a response -- positive, negative, or neutral-- which may be linked to mechanisms of memory, such that an experience is retained by a person for an extended period of time” (Wong, 2013).

As Darrell Kau, professor of marketing at the University of Oregon stresses, there is a strong correlation between experience and the decision-making process. Positive or negative experiences with a brand or product inevitably influence decisions about whether or not to purchase or participate in the future (2013-2014).

Experiential marketing hinges on the creation of experiences with high impact, or “degree of influence” (Matthews, 2013). While impact may be measurable, in the form of subsequent sales, web traffic, social media interaction, attendance, participation, and more (Morton, 2013), experiential marketing taps into the intangible indicators of impact, such as emotional response, changes in perception, and word of mouth referrals (DiMatteo, 2011). The impact of an experience allows a brand “to come alive” for the consumer through sensory engagement. “‘The ancient Chinese proverb by Confucius sums up this idea: “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.’ In other words, the more senses are involved, the more you learn” (Pfanner). Impact is even greater when an experience demonstrates how a product or service fits directly into their lives (DiMatteo, 2011). Globetrotter, a German sporting goods company, strategically placed “weather chambers” in their stores, which allow shoppers to don Globetrotter gear in a range of simulated weather conditions. Customers endure rain showers, high winds, and freezing temperatures, all within the safety of the retail store. While this tactic received some criticism for being “outlandish” and “wasteful,” many customers expressed the relevance of testing equipment before having to depend on it in the field. The immersive “stunt” created a memorable engagement with and trust in the product, proving the experience “much more valuable than just a marketing gimmick” (Ciotti, 2013).

Perhaps Globetrotter marketers understood Marshall McLuhan’s poignant reminder that the medium is, indeed, the message. Claims of high performance are one thing, but to demonstrate these claims in real time, and in a manner immediately accessible to present shoppers, simultaneously legitimizes and personalizes the brand’s message.
Globetrotter customers not only receive the message loud and clear through direct physical contact, but then are able to transpose it into a story of their own. This model illuminates just how the scale of the experience is directly linked to the level of impact that it has. Convinced customers of Globetrotter will likely end up purchasing the product, and then tell all their friends about how and why they were convinced. Buzz that generates so naturally and effectively will likely snowball to reach greater audiences.

These kinds of deeply engaging experiences create connections between the brand, the product, and the consumer; a tantalizing moment that “lures the willing participant” (Ogden, 2013). Speaking broadly, a connection is a “meaningful interaction” (Volkmann, 2013), and may occur on many planes, including the virtual. “While new (especially social) media has undoubtedly increased our ability to connect with one another (no geographical bounds, communication is instantaneous, etc.), there is concern that face-to-face connection is slowly being phased out” (Richardson, 2013). Experiential marketing can serve to re-engage human connection on a more intimate and personal level. For many, “connections define identity, they provide the physical, emotional, and spiritual energy that brings people alive” (Renner, 2013). “There must be a certain relationship between the customer and the product. Creativity, innovativeness and cultural content of the product or service alone are not sufficient for creating an experience” (Pfanner, 2000). Each year at the Festival Italiano at Belmar, a Wine Stomp is hosted and tailored especially for kids. The juice collected is then used in the production of Balisteri’s Little Feet Merlot for the next year’s festival. Fun for the whole family, children delight at the messy act of stomping on grapes in a giant bin, and parents relish the sight while sipping on samples of the newly released batch stomped the previous year (DiMatteo, 2011). This memorable activity allows families to not only buy in to a product, but also take part in creating it. Engaging in this process increases the likeliness that consumers will look forward to participating and purchasing the product year after year. Assuming this tradition continues for decades or generations, it can be argued that the children who stomped grapes for the Little Feet Merlot, will already be loyal customers upon reaching the legal drinking age.

Making these kinds of multi-dimensional connections with consumers is difficult unless you are knowledgeable about who your audience is. A consumer is traditionally defined as a “person who purchases goods or services for personal use” (Google), however, it is beneficial to any business or non-profit to view potential and current
participants as much more complex entities with human characteristics: needs, desires, emotions, identities, cultural ties, and beyond. “As experiential marketers design their campaigns to develop long-term emotional bonds with consumers, they must employ research tools to understand and know their target consumer intimately” (Ong, 2013). It may be helpful to think of consumers as not consumers at all, but as clients, customers, participants, or friends. This approach situates a business or organization as an ally, rather than a solicitor. Likewise, remaining open to feedback ensures an ongoing, open conversation between the organization and their constituents. “Listen to consumers and use their ideas to innovate and improve your product or service. Listen, learn, and never cease to innovate” (Ong, 2013). Responding to consumer feedback in this way demonstrates a dedication and willingness to serve their needs in the best possible way. It also allows an organization to keep its finger on the pulse of their evolving consumer base, and the culture that surrounds it.

Tapping into consumer culture is an important aspect of understanding clients and maintaining relevancy in the market. The term culture serves as an “umbrella word for the attitudes, traditions, products, and social structures within a society” (Morton, 2013). Culture can “characterize a group of people, including ways of thinking and social interactions” (Wong, 2013). Experiential marketing campaigns can view culture as “a collective sense of identity” (Volkmann, 2013), and tailor messages to suit them. McLuhan suggests for those studying media to consider “not only the ‘content’ but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates” (1964). Brands may draw from existing culture(s) to position themselves strategically in the market, align themselves with subcultures to cultivate following, and even generate their own culture by building brand loyalty. The company CLIF Bar has worked hard to build a culture of loyal CLIF fans who regularly seek and consume their line of protein, energy, and snack products tailored for people with active, adventurous lifestyles. They have been highly successful for a company that relies almost exclusively on experiential field marketing, foregoing any use of traditional advertising in the form of television, print, or online ads. Instead, they invest their marketing budget into a strong network of nationwide field marketing teams that set up at events, expos, marathons, races, and more. Their enthusiastic field team members (who are athletes, adventurers, and advocates themselves) are onsite to pass out samples, play games, host contests, talk openly about the products, answer questions, and receive and record feedback. Enthusiasm, encouragement, excitement, and discussion are on a constant loop at CLIF Bar’s carefully designed event tents. Meanwhile, they strategically hand out their product to runners and other athletes who can then use the product right when
they need it—before, during, and/or after a race. These little freebies generate a positive response and a memorable experience, especially when athletes can associate their own level of performance with the product itself. Fans of CLIF Bar remain fans because they know the product is effective, and they feel good about supporting the company that “started on a bike ride.” Much like the athletes and adventurous individuals it serves, CLIF Bar celebrates its own progress yet admits there is always room for improvement: “Today, we still want to make things better. Our food. Our company. Even our planet.” To further illuminate their emphasis on self-improvement, CLIF Bar skips a mission statement and instead lists “5 Aspirations: Sustaining our Planet, Sustaining our Community, Sustaining our People, Sustaining our Business, and Sustaining our Brands” (http://www.clifbar.com/soul/who_we_are/), only one of which indirectly refers to the very product they sell (Sustaining our People). The company has both tapped into, and cultivated a culture centering around healthy, active, and conscious lifestyles that draw connections between the brand, its products, and its customers. Their presence at select events provides a social environment for like-minded fans to bond over the product. In this way, the CLIF Bar tents are both the medium and the message; they become the cultural embodiment of a distinct market. Furthermore, CLIF Bar has geniously created a malleable model which translates across all of their sub-brands: CLIF Bar, Luna Bar, and CLIF kids!. The same model with different merchandising and varying products is equally effective and targets specific sub-segments of the greater market (athletes, women, children, families, etc).

Non-profit arts and culture organizations have much to learn from their commercial counterparts in the world of marketing. “Nonprofit and arts organizations should... be inspired by companies that are changing the face of marketing” (Japser, 2013). However, according to Aaron Hurst, the President and CEO of the Taproot Foundation, “Nonprofits are already far more skilled at experiential marketing than companies. Creating volunteer experiences that give donors first-hand exposure to issues in the community has been a trick of the trade for decades” (2012). He predicts that nonprofits will increase investment in experiential marketing to better understand how to professionalize experiential strategies in order to build public support (Hurst, 2012). Given the operating reality of most nonprofits, they have “always had to rely on scrappy ideas when there isn’t budget to do fancy marketing” (Jasper, 2013). Luckily, experiential marketing can still be a success, even without a big budget. As Emily Jasper, blog writer for The Starr Conspiracy, points out, “In many instances, resourceful marketing is more innovative” (2013). There are a multitude of approaches, however there are a few key elements that all effective experiential marketing campaigns share, including the unavoidable intention of allowing
your audience to truly experience your product or service through an immersive, participatory, sensory experience. Beyond this, experts agree that organizations should leverage these interactions with customers to listen to and address feedback, both good and bad (DiMatteo, 2011; Ong, 2013; Ciotti, 2013). When a marketing campaign allows room for conversation that strengthens the relationships between a nonprofit organization and the people they serve, everybody wins.

Figure 1
References


