Olivia Simpson
The Power of Consumers and Unforgettable Experiences: Why PR Practitioners Should Abandon the Traditional

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Oliva Simpson

The Power of Consumers and Unforgettable Experiences: Why PR Practitioners Should Abandon the Traditional

Consumers are powerful influencers in today's society with higher levels of trust and perceived credibility than traditional media forms, thus highlighting them as a key target for PR activity. This article explores why PR practitioners should focus their communication efforts towards the consumer and why doing so can help build consumer brand reputations and relationships with the target audience.

To encourage these powerful influencers to advocate the brand on their behalf through positive word-of-mouth, PR practitioners need to enthrall, inspire, bring the brand to life and build a strong emotional connection with the consumer so they feel the brand becomes a part of their own identity and story. A way of doing so is through consumer brand experiences. This article highlights the benefits of tailoring such unique and immersive experiences to the consumer, as appose to journalists, and how this is an effective and necessary tool for the PR practitioner. It also explores what the future holds for the concept.

Traditionally, when Public Relations practitioners (PRPs) stage brand experiences for consumer brands they rest upon the influence of journalists to advocate these clients through editorial coverage, product reviews or opinion pieces (Pollack 2013). Yet such a strong focus and dedication to attract and impress journalists' neglects to recognise the media is not the only influencer in today's society and a shift in power now means almost anyone can exert influence, including the brands own consumers (Vincx 2015). Indeed, building strong links with journalists is crucial, however, with the changing media environment and the proliferation of social media, there is now an infinite space for consumer interactions. With such resources at their fingertips, today's consumers are connected, informed and more vocal than ever before. They can discover and investigate anything and everything, determine decision-making criteria, pursue opinions from peers, evaluate their options, and share personal impressions and experiences with

others, anytime and anywhere (Weber and Henderson 2014). As a result, there is no doubt in today's society there has been an inversion of influence and this now lies in the hands of the mass population (Edelman 2016).

DO CONSUMERS TRUST TRADITIONAL?

People no longer rely on well-informed opinion shapers for news and information and instead favour peer-influenced media. The Edelman (2016) Trust Barometer found two of the top three most frequently used sources of news and information are now peer-driven with 67% of consumers using social media for news and information. The reason for this stems from the idea people tend to pay most attention to someone similar to themselves, since social media allows individuals to be part of a network of like-minded individuals.

This is not a new concept, long before social media, Lazarfeld and Merton (1954) proposed the term homophily which refers to the idea similar individuals associate with each other more often because similarity breeds connections. Homophily facilitates information flow because similar people have greater influence over each other than dissimilar people (McPherson et al. 2001; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). Therefore, the greater the perceived homophily between sender and receiver, the greater the receiver's perception of the message (Sweeney et al. 2014).

This homophily between information senders and receivers engenders higher levels of trust which surpasses the trust they have in the media (Vincx 2015). In support of this, Nielsen (2009) reported 90% of consumers trust 'real friends' and 'virtual strangers' more than newspapers, TV and magazines. These peer recommendations, both online and offline, are perceived as unbiased, hence why the majority of consumers, 84%, trust word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations (Nielsen 2013). Due to its informal, interpersonal nature, WOM bypasses consumer's sceptical defences, which they have for traditional media messaging, and is therefore a powerful and credible communication source (Harrison-Walker 2001).

To summarise, academic scholarship suggests there is no more powerful communication technique than the simple act of one like-minded person talking to another (Barber and Wallace 2010). The chances are that consumers are more likely to believe, and remember, what their friends have told them than the media. An example of the effectiveness of WOM is demonstrated by fashion brand Superdry. Superdry were reluctant to invest money in any form of traditional media, advertising, sponsorship or celebrity endorsements and instead relied solely on word-of-mouth recommendations (Knight 2014). Additionally, celebrities like David Beckham, Justin Bieber and Nicole Sherzinger were seen wearing their clothes, leading to fantastic publicity for the brand and sparking conversations (Langham 2014). The brand saw quick success and has grown exponentially since then, largely due to the organic WOM and mentions on social media. The power of WOM proved to be incredibly valuable for Superdry.

HOW DOES THIS EFFECT PRPs?

For PRPs, this highlights a strong need to consider consumers as influencers since WOM and peer opinions are trusted more than traditional media forms. For example, 75% of consumers say they make decisions about a brand based on conversations with peers (Edelman 2016). Since consumers listen to other consumers when it comes to brand choices, instead of designing communication tactics especially for media, PRPs should embrace tailoring activities to appeal to consumers and encourage them to be influencers for the brand.

Consumers can become brand advocates when they are highly involved with a brand, and enjoy it so much they willingly offer invaluable positive WOM to their network of peers (Wragg 2004). This positive WOM increases consumer trust in the brand and aids development of the essential consumer-brand relationships. Thus, highlighting the importance of this tactic for PRPs, considering their role revolves around building the brands reputation amongst target consumers and establishing such relationships.

However, brand advocates are only active when they have emotional bonds with a brand (Wragg 2004; Goldsmith 2009). This is because consumers today are more emotionally driven and it is fair to say they think more with their hearts than with their heads when choosing a brand (Gobe 2009). This means PRPs really need to offer something meaningful to satisfy consumer's emotional needs and desires and ensure the brand becomes a part of the consumer's identity (Gobe 2009; Wallace et al. 2012). By forging deep, lasting, emotional connections, this engages the power of the consumer-brand relationship and empowers consumers to be advocates for the brand. PR professionals need to understand the consumer-brand relationship and, therefore, bring the brand to life in a meaningful way. This should inspire consumers to advocate on the brand's behalf, in an age where consumers' views are more influential than ever (Halloran 2014; Bacon 2015). An effective technique for doing just this is through extraordinary and unique consumer brand experiences which are designed specifically with the consumer in mind.

CONSUMER CENTRIC BRAND EXPERIENCES

To encourage brand advocacy, consumers need to be enthralled and enthused enough to want to do so. A plethora of brands are fighting for attention in today's competitive environment which means straightforward "features-and-benefits" communication is very unlikely to break through the message clutter (Thompson et al. 2006; Schmitt 1999a). In this saturated market, PR campaigns creating immersive consumer brand experiences, which allow consumers to be completely surrounded by the brand, are increasingly seeing success (Bennett 2016). This involves creating a holistic experience, which ensures the consumer understands and is connected to all elements of the brand, including the brand story, culture and personality, to really bring it to life and enable consumers to see it as more than just a brand but as a part of their life. This creates an ongoing dialogue with the consumer and delivers an emotional fulfilment so they develop a special bond with and a unique trust in the brand (Morrison and Crane 2007). The premise of this communication tactic is to disseminate a brand's key messages, but

more importantly, it creates a closer relationship between the consumer and brand by involving and immersing consumers in an interactive, engaging and memorable experience (Drenger et al. 2008; Moth 2014; Tafesse 2016).

If PRPs create this narrative and stir genuine positive emotions within consumers, through an exciting and memorable consumer brand experience which embodies the spirit of the brand, consumers are more likely to associate positive emotions with the brand, and share their experiences with peers (Moth 2014). Therefore, PR campaigns which connect the stories at the heart of the brand with memorable consumer brand experiences generate a buzz, encourage brand advocacy and strengthen the essential engaging relationship and emotional connection with consumers (Pitney Bowes 2014; Dunn 2014).

An example of an exceptional immersive consumer brand experience was delivered by M&C Saatchi PR for Virgin Holidays. They unveiled to the public a giant luxury treehouse on London's South Bank which was inspired by and brought to life their Virgin Holidays "Wonderlist" experience in South Africa (Reynolds 2016). The treehouse featured bespoke bedrooms and a private terrace which celebrated contemporary South African design to replicate the luxury accommodation. Consumers were invited to visit during the day and a lucky few had the chance to win an overnight stay, where they also received a six-course dining experience cooked by a South African celebrity chef, allowing them to experience a truly unique safari holiday in London.

Figure 1: Virgin Holidays Wonderlist, Campaing (M&C Saatch, 2016)

As well as the emotional bond it creates, these novel experiences provide the consumer with an element of leisure and distraction, something which is becoming the driving economic force of modern society (Haig 2006). Consumers want to be distracted, entertained and to indulge in escapism. As the world continues to descend further into war and violence it is no wonder brand communications which offer a temporary escape are ever more popular (Haig 2006). This idea is further supported by Mintel's (2012) trend "Immaterial World". This describes how consumers are looking to enrich their lives with special experiences and memories, rather than by acquiring worldly possessions, and as a result people seem to be looking for immersive experiences to help them feel something reminiscent of a different time or place (Glasgow 2013). It suggests PRPs can capitalise on this trend by becoming brand experience facilitators and creating truly unforgettable, imaginative and unique experiences (Glasgow 2013).

However, it is important to note that although it is imperative the experiences are extraordinary enough to build a real noise behind them, create consumer memories and engender brand advocacy, they also must be relevant and topical to the brand so the consumer can make connections between their memories and the brand itself (Hemsley 2007).

THE FUTURE OF CONSUMER BRAND EXPERIENCES?

Heightened customer expectations and the constant innovation of technology is unleashing creativity and provoking more imaginative forms of brand experiences (Weber and Henderson 2014). With this in mind, it is predicted the future of consumer brand experiences will become even more immersive with an increase in multi-sensory activities (Weber and Henderson 2014; Saville 2015). Currently, the industry can do more to fully embrace the use of multi-sensory methods to deliver unforgettable experiences for consumers. Since senses are the cornerstone of human life, consumer brand experiences can be made even more memorable and impactful if they incorporate sight, sound, smell, taste and touch effectively (London & Partners 2015). For example, through the use of projections and visual illusions, music, scent, culinary experiences and augmented reality, which allow the consumers to feel like they have left the real world behind and entered a different time or place in reality (Dunn 2014). The more senses an experience engages, the more effective and memorable it can be for the consumer. Research shows sensory cues of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch can affect our preferences, memories and choices, meaning they play a crucial part in the creation of a brand relationship and memorable experience (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Schmitt 2003; Krishna 2010). For PRPs it is no longer just about delivering messages, it is also about making consumers feel something, so appealing to all senses plays a crucial part in building essential emotional connections (Pine and Gilmore 1998; Schmitt 2003; Krishna 2010; London & Partners 2015).

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The ability to create and deliver remarkable consumer brand experiences will soon be the signature of successful PR campaigns (Weber and Henderson 2014). By creating

unforgettable, dazzling multi-sensory, interactive and brand relevant consumer brand experiences, PRPs can produce memorable brand moments which connect emotionally with the consumer and add value to their lives, as well as encourage them to share their experience with peers and generate positive WOM (Smilansky 2009).

It is much more beneficial for PRPs to put focus on and use influencers who are most trusted, listened to and whose opinions are most respected by the target audience to build the brand reputation in a more credible and efficient way. As humans we talk about experiences all the time, because ultimately life is an amalgamation of daily experiences; they are real, they are true life (Smilansky 2009). Therefore, positive consumer brand experiences are likely to be discussed and passed on to immediate peers and publics. This reason being why experiences are such an important tactic for PRPs as this discussion and conversation helps with building the brand's reputation.

Additionally, consumers want experiences which dazzle their senses, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds (Schmitt 1999b). They want experiences they can relate to, incorporate into their lives and pass on to peers (Schmitt 1999b). Consumer brand experiences therefore have the ability to accomplish the wants and needs of both PRPs and consumers alike. Consequently, the coverage of these experiences through social media and WOM, as well as the memories they create, ensures the brand messages conveyed persist long after the experiences are complete (Donlan and Crowther 2014; Tafesse et al. 2014).

So to conclude, PRPs need to tailor brand experiences to the consumer, allowing them to interact with brands sensorially and emotionally and inviting them to interweave the brand with their own stories which they simply must share with others. This not only empowers and satisfies the consumer, and creates a long lasting connection between them and the brand, but it also means the brand name is at the forefront of the most trusted and powerful influencers possible, the consumers.

REFERENCES

Bacon, J., 2015. 3 ways to engage the new breed of brand advocates. *Marketing Week* [online], 23 July 2015. Available from: https://www.marketingweek.com/2015/07/23/3-ways-to-engage-the-new-breed-of-brand-advocates/ [Accessed 21 April 2016].

Barber, P. and Wallace, L., 2010. *Building a Buzz: Libraries & Word-of-mouth Marketing.* Chicago: American Library Association.

Bennett, A., 2016. *How to create an immersive brand experience.* UK: Axonn. Available from: https://www.axonn.media/digital-advice/how-to-create-an-immersive-brand-experience [Accessed 20 April 2016].

De Bruyn, A. and Lilien, G., 2008. A multi-stage model of word-of-mouth influence through viral marketing. *International Journal of Marketing Research* [online], 25 (3), 151–163.

Donlan, L., and Crowther, P., 2014. Leveraging sponsorship to achieve consumer relationship objectives through the creation of 'marketing spaces': an exploratory study. *Journal of Marketing Communications* [online], 20 (4), 291–306.

Drenger, J., Gaus, H. and Jahn, S., 2008. Does flow influence the brand image in event marketing?. *Journal of Advertising Research* [online], 48 (1), 138–147.

Dunn, J., 2014. The golden era of PR stunts is back and this time its digital. *PR Moment* [online], 6 May 2014. Available from: http://www.prmoment.com/2579/the-golden-era-of-pr-stunts-is-back-and-this-time-its-digital.aspx [Accessed 20 April 2016].

Edelman, 2016. *2016 Edelman Trust Barometer* [online]. United States: Edelman Inc.

Glasgow, S., 2013. How can brands use immersive experiences to drive engagement. *Mintel* [online], 17 September 2013. Available from: http://www.mintel.com/blog/new-market-trends/how-can-brands-use-immersive-experiences-to-drive-engagement [Accessed 20 April 2016].

Gobe, M., 2009. *Emotional branding: the new paradigm for connecting brands to people*. New York: Allworth Press.

Goldsmith, R., 2009. Conversational capital: How to create stuff people love to talk about. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* [online], 26 (5), 370–371.

Haig, M., 2006. *Brand royalty: how the world's top 100 brands thrive & survive*. London: Kogan Page.

Halloran, T., 2014. *Romancing the brand: how brands create strong, intimate relationships with customers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Harrison-Walker, L., 2001. The measurement of word-of-mouth communication and investigation of service quality and customer commitment as potential antecedents. *Journal of Service Research* [online], 4 (1), 60-75.

Hemsley, S., 2007. MARKETING FEATURE: The fight for brand events. *PR Week* [online], 6 June 2007. Available from: http://www.prweek.com/article/662549/marketing-feature-fight-brand-events#dSatYbd1cElcOLMB.99 [Accessed 21 April 2016].

Holbrook, M. and Hirschman, E., 1982. The Experiential Aspect of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun. *Journal of Consumer Research* [online], 9 (2), 132-140.

Knight, M., 2014. Social Marketing: Word Of Mouth Case Studies From Superdry And Starbucks. *Social Media Week* [online], 24 January 2014. Available from: http://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2014/01/social-marketing-word-mouth-case-studies-superdry-starbucks/ [Accessed 21 April 2016].

Krishna, A., 2010. *Sensory Marketing: Research on the Sensuality of Products*. London: Routledge Academic.

Langham, M., 2014. Word of Mouth Marketing Thrives Through Social Media. *Social Media Today* [online], 25 November 2014. Available from: http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/word-mouth-marketing-thrives-through-social-media-0 [Accessed 22 April 2016].

Lazarsfeld, P. and Merton, R., 1954. Friendship as a social process: a substantive and methodological analysis. *In:* Berger, M. and Able, T., Eds. *Freedom and Control in Modern Society*. New York: Van Nostrand, 18-66.

London & Partners, 2015. *Events industry not using sensory experiences to their full potential, according to new study*. London: London & Partners. Available from: http://www.londonandpartners.com/media-centre/press-releases/2015/20151013-events-industry-not-using-sensory-experiences-to-their-full-potential-according-to-new-study [Accessed 21 April 2016].

McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L. and Cook, J., 2001. Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology* [online], 27 (1), 415-444.

Mintel, 2012. *Lifestyles of the Ultra-affluent and HNWI's* [online]. UK: Mintel Group Ltd.

Morrison, S. and Crane, F., 2007. Building the service brand by creating and managing an emotional brand experience. *Brand Management* [online], 14 (5), 410-421.

Moth, D., 2014. *10 very cool examples of experiential marketing.* London: Econsultancy. Available from: https://econsultancy.com/blog/65230-10-very-cool-examples-of-experiential-marketing/ [Accessed 20 April 2016].

Nielsen, 2009. *Global advertising consumers trust real friends and virtual strangers the most* [online]. New York: The Nielson Company.

Nielsen, 2013. *Under The Influence: Consumer Trust in Advertising* [online]. New York: The Nielson Company.

Oldham, T., 2016. *Luxury treehouse inspired by Virgin Holidays South African destinations, London, Britain* [photograph]. London: REX. Available from: http://www.rexfeatures.com/search/?kw=virgin+holidays+treehouse&js-site-search_submit=Go&order=newest&iso=GBR&lkw=&viah=Y&stk=N&sft=&timer=N&iprs=f&search_action_desktop= [Accessed 30 April 2016].

Pine, J. and Gilmore, J., 1998. Welcome to the Experience Economy. *Harvard Business Review* [online], July-August 1998. Available from: https://hbr.org/1998/07/welcome-to-the-experience-economy [Accessed 21 April 2016].

Pitney Bowes, 2014. *How are you really performing? A business may only ever find out the answer if they ask clients the right questions* [online]. USA: Pitney Bowes Inc. Available

from: http://www.pitneybowes.com/pr/articles/customer-experience.html [Accessed 20 April 2016].

Pollack, S., 2013. *Disrupted, From Gen Y to iGen: Communicating with The Next Generation*. Los Angeles: Pacific Coast Creative Publishing.

Reynolds, A., 2016. Virgin Holidays opens South African treehouse on Southbank. *PR Week* [online], 25 January 2016. Available from: http://www.prweek.com/article/1380634/virgin-holidays-opens-south-african-treehouse-southbank#XasiD1e3gBUutl66.99 [Accessed 21 April 2016].

Saville, P., 2015. What does 2016 hold for brand experiences? 5 trends for the coming year. *Marketing Magazine* [online], 22 December 2015. Available from: http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/article/1377697/does-2016-hold-brand-experiences-5-trends-coming-year [Accessed 21 April 2016].

Schmitt, B., 1999a. *Experiential marketing: how to get customers to sense, feel, think, act, and relate to your company and brands*. New York: The Free Press.

Schmitt, B., 1999b. Experiential Marketing: A New Framework for Design and Communications. *Design Management Journal* [online], 10 (2), 10-16.

Schmitt, B., 2003. *Customer Experience Management: A revolutionary approach to connecting with your customers*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Smilansky, S., 2009. *Experiential Marketing: A Practical Guide to Interactive Brand Experiences*. London: Kogan Page.

Sweeney, J., Soutar, G. and Mazzarol, T., 2014. Factors enhancing word-of-mouth influence: Positive and negative service-related messages. *European Journal of Marketing* [online], 24 (1-2), 336-359.

Tafesse, W., 2016. Conceptualization of Brand Experience in an Event Marketing Context. *Journal of Promotional Management* [online], 22 (1), 34-48.

Tafesse, W., Narui, J., and Korneliussen, T., 2014. Branding goals and strategies at international auto shows. *International Journal of Marketing Studies* [online], 6 (4), 23–34.

Thompson, C, Rindfleisch, A. and Arsel, Z., 2006. Emotional Branding and the Strategic Value of the Doppelgänger Brand Image. *Journal of Marketing* [online], 70 (1), 50-64.

Vincx, F., 2015. *Influencer marketing: Can your customers be your biggest influencers?*. Bristol: Sift Media Ltd. Available from: http://www.mycustomer.com/marketing/strategy/influencer-marketing-can-your-customers-be-your-biggest-influencers [Accessed 22 April 2016].

Wallace, E., Buil, I. and De Chernatony, L., 2012. Facebook 'friendship' and brand advocacy. *Journal of Brand Management* [online], 20 (2), 128-146.

Weber, L., and Henderson, L., 2014. *Digital Marketer: Ten New Skills You Must Learn to Stay Relevant and Customer-Centric.* New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Wragg, T., 2004. Nurturing brand advocates. *Brand Strategy* [online], 187 (1), 36–37.