

Experiential comes of age

WPP Group has given experiential marketing a shot in the arm by describing it as a "crucial sector" following its decision to merge branding and events agency PCI Fitch with digital specialist Clever Media to create a global experiential agency called FitchLive (MW last week). But many marketers are still unsure about exactly what experiential means and how it can help their brands.

One of the main challenges for the experiential sector is to shake off the perception that it is the "stunts department of advertising". Advocates point to the fact that global powerhouses such as Unilever, Nike, British Airways and Vodafone have successfully engaged with consumers and encouraged them to interact with their brands using experiential marketing. But the discipline is still some way down the pecking order in the eyes of most marketing directors.

Experiential marketing does not have its own trade association and because brands classify it in different ways it is difficult to come up with a definitive total annual spend for the UK. However, WPP predicts that between 68% and 89% of clients will spend more on experiential marketing this year than in the previous 12 months.

Market growth

The Marketing Communications Consultants Association (MCCA), whose remit covers experiential, says about 70% of its members now offer experiential marketing – up from almost nothing two years ago. It estimates that about 10% claim to be purely live brand or experiential agencies and MCCA managing director Scott Knox says: "That shows the growth in the market."

Knox adds: "People think about events, roadshows and in-store sampling when they think about experiential but it's a lot bigger than that. Jack Morton, for example, does the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics."

Managing partner of one of the country's biggest experiential agencies RPM Hugh Robertson, who is also an MCCA board member, describes experiential as "the point of engagement between the consumer and a brand's product or service". He points out that experiential marketing has been around since the late 19th century, when Winchester Rifles ran roadshows to allow people to try out their guns.

Robertson adds: "Consumers are looking for a more personal interaction with brands and experiential is there to provide



Knox: MCCA managing director says experiential marketing is a lot bigger than just events, roadshows and in-store sampling

that. It is not the answer to everyone's prayers but it is an important tool that should be used as part of an overall marketing plan. But sometimes experiential is used as a catch-all for all non-traditional marketing rather than what it actually is, which is a strategic marketing tool."

An increasing number of direct marketing and sales promotion agencies are beginning to move into the experiential arena. Nick Adams, who set up Triangle's brand experience agency Lime in 2001 but left in 2005 to launch Sense, believes evaluation is the key to giving the discipline more credibility.

"If we don't evaluate, the perception of experiential will get worse," he adds. "It's not just about how many people you reach. You need to have proper evaluation criteria that look at how you changed behaviour and influenced perception. That will help clients see it as a serious discipline."

Nude image

One of the most famous experiential campaigns of all time was created by Cunning Stunts in 1999. The agency projected a nude image of Gail Porter onto the Houses of Parliament to promote men's magazine FHM but it has since changed its name to Cunning and now describes itself as a "solution neutral creative agency".

Co-founder Anna Carlross says: "For us it's about coming up with a strategy that has got some longevity rather than just tactical one-off events and PR stunts."

It seems that experiential marketing is coming of age but the industry must do more to demonstrate the tangible results of its work to prove its true worth to brands.

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