

COLUMNS

Delivering experience as retail convenience becomes an expectation

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The demand from consumers for retail convenience is at an all-time high.

With companies from Amazon to Postmates offering third-party apps that allow you to order fashion apparel and accessories, leather goods, groceries and food, and home goods straight to your door with the push of a button, having almost anything you need available at your fingertips becomes addicting.

Now, this convenience is changing the behavioral patterns of consumers. How do these changes impact experiential entertainment companies and what can they do to embrace them?

Feeling good

First, experiential companies must recognize the challenges in front of them.

Now, more than ever, parents feel constantly busy and time-stressed. According to a study done by Pew Social Trends, among all working parents with children under age 18, more than half (56 percent) say it is difficult for them to balance the responsibilities of their job with the responsibilities of their family.

An easy fix is for parents to allow their children to spend more time playing Xbox or watching YouTube videos. As a result, families may be more inclined to just stay in.

On the other end, when they do head out for entertainment, families and friends now have a wider range of paid-entertainment options from which to choose escape rooms, virtual reality venues and social media worthy pop-up museums.

While the environment is competitive, there is also a positive cultural headwind with young adults and younger parents: millennials and Gen-Zers love experiences.

In fact, a study conducted by the Harris Group reported that 72 percent of them would choose experience over a material item giving companies that offer experiences the upper hand.

So how can experiential entertainment companies thrive in this somewhat contradictory environment?

Value and values

At every turn, the companies must remain aware that they are in a highly competitive fight for their audience's precious leisure time.

There is an increasing urgency for marketers to bring their brand experience to life in a way that not just captures attention ("that looks cool") but also overcomes the inertia of in-home convenience ("We need to go do that!").

Doing this in conjunction with another brand or social media influencer with their own audience will add reach and relevance to the effort.

The brand story also needs to communicate a purpose, or social commitment, that resonates with the target audience.

Connecting on this emotional level is a powerful way to stand out from the crowd, while providing more meaning to the customer's visits.

In a study done by RetailMeNot, 66 percent of U.S. Internet users think that more brands should take a public stand on important social values.

For example, at Sky Zone, earlier this year we offered federal government employees and their families free jumps during the government shutdown. We did this for all the right reasons of providing the joy of active play to stressed members of our local communities.

However, the outpouring of social media comments cheering us on was surprisingly loud and, in fact, emotionally moving.

Experiential companies must also be hyper-focused on offering stellar customer service, or "guest experience," as we call it.

Customers' perception about how they were treated while at a venue plays an outsized role in their likelihood of returning, not to mention their likelihood of posting a positive online review.

It is imperative for experiential companies to measure and track their CX ratings to truly understand what impacts guest satisfaction and then act to improve these measures.

Another important element customers crave from companies is authenticity, especially in a world that has become more digital by day.

While this may seem somewhat hypocritical when so many of these same customers spend hours each day on social media altering their personas and editing photos, they are interested in connecting with brands that are honest and transparent.

Real thing

A Cohn & Wolfe study reported that 87 percent of all global consumers believed that it was necessary for brands to "[act] with integrity at all times". So how exactly can your brand be more authentic?

- A creative voice is a key to developing trust and engagement with millennials and Gen-Zers today. Seize the moment to interact, communicate and engage with your audience as much as possible. Consumers know that brands can see when you are tagged and mentioned, and want to hear from you. While responding to every single notification is not realistic, make it a point to engage with at least a few fans every day.
- Be transparent. Millennials have become increasingly distrustful of advertisements, and brands need to prove why they are worth it. Open up to consumers with your business by showing what happens behind the scenes in order to build trust and a connection with your followers.

EXPERIENTIAL ENTERTAINMENT companies must keep evolving to offer updated content, products or attractions that line up with the interests and values of your core audience.

It is imperative to consistently pay attention to your audience and how their needs, wants and beliefs are changing to adapt our brands to be relevant and perhaps even inspirational.

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