

By B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore



Virtual Experiences

In our last column we discussed how physical experiences can help sell your offerings better than any traditional marketing campaign. We mentioned, for example, how REI's uses in-store mountain-climbing, cross-country skiing, bicycling, and kayaking experiences to get customers to experience the goods before they buy them. But REI's experience portfolio also extends to its website, REI.com: PCs in REI's stores feed people directly to its website, while online presentations in turn push people to the company's stores.

Remember: the experience is the marketing. Then note: you can use virtual marketing experiences, as well as physical ones, to create demand for your offerings. Automaker BMW maintains bmwfilms.com to showcase short films by edgy filmmakers that, not coincidentally, feature its own cars. At www.motorola.experience.com, Motorola created a futuristic environment—where as a visitor you can “explore the many worlds of your personal network” to “experience the future”—in order to expose its consumer and business customers to its new technologies. Here are a few ways to think about marketing via your own virtual experiences.

Create a flagship site. This is the singular place (www.yourcompanyname.com) on the web where people expect to experience your offerings. Unfortunately, most companies treat their websites as pure brochure-ware rather than experience-fare. Gamesites like www.MaMaMedia.com, however, make for engaging online flagships. Many companies recognize this and have turned at least part of their flagship site into gamelike experiences. For example, custom houseboat maker Somerset posts pictures from its manufacturing lines to its website so each customer can check on a daily basis the production progress of his own boat. Similarly, LEGO Company stages online experiences at www.lego.com, including story contests, consumer-created movie events, imaginary worlds, and mass customization offerings.

Integrate physical and virtual experiences. Like REI, figure out how to make the two feed on each other to increase demand. The Pleasant Company excels at this, leveraging its face-to-face interactions at the American Girl Place to create demand for its remote relationships via catalog and website. Retailer Gallery Furniture of Houston, Texas, has a slew of mobile cameras set up in its warehouse-like store that website visitors control. (Many

customers use the capability while talking via cell phone with their at-work spouses, sparing extra trips to see the furniture under consideration.)

Use the web to extend the dramatic structure of your experience. Our friend Peter Chernack, president of MetaVision Corporation in Burbank, California, advocates using the Web as a “pre-show” (a term borrowed from Disney's use of its queuing areas to set up the “back story” of its rides) to create anticipation for the experience ahead. Shoemaker Vans does this when it streams video from its Skateparks to its website so potential customers can view the physical action electronically.

Perhaps the movie studios are best at this, with their use of online trailers, behind-the-scenes videos, and other digital experiences that, when done well, greatly enhance the likelihood of having a hit on their hands. The producers of *The Blair Witch Project* gained much fame for leveraging their online pre-show to create an audience for the subsequent film in theatres. However, the most successful pre-show may be that of New Line Cinema, the makers of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* and its two upcoming sequels. It brought the fanatical followers of J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional trilogy—who not only provide the core audience for filmed versions, but who could have easily derailed its potential through word-of-badmouth—all but into the filming and production process. Through a carefully managed official website (www.lordoftherings.net) launched two-and-a-half years before the movie premiere, New Line generated unprecedented online buzz, with over 1 billion hits prior to the opening of the first film.

The World Wide Web can also be used for a dramatic “post-show” experience. We've talked before about how the Experience Music Project (EMP) in Seattle creates mass customized web pages to refer back to the artifacts most enjoyed by its individual guests. Vans documents online every one of its Warped Tour stops, complete with artist list and a gallery of photos (“Hey, dude, is that me in that picture?”).

Do your guests have a similar opportunity to extend their experiences long after they leave your physical place?

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