Experiential Marketing:

The Customer and the Carbon Chain of Phenomenon

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There is some contestation over what "experiential marketing" includes, in regards to both strategy and theory. While some argue that "experiential," "engagement," "event," "live," or "participation" marketing are interchangeable terms, other disagree (Ippolito, 2012, para. 2). For the purposes of clarity, I will exclusively use the term experiential marketing here, investigating its conceptual underpinnings. Schmitt (1999), a seminal figure in defining this fairly new approach to marketing, describes experiential marketing in relation to the way marketers view customers. While traditional marketing assumes customers to be "rational *decision-makers* who care about functional features and benefits"(emphasis mine), experiential marketers view customers as rational and emotional *human beings* who are concerned with their experiences of and with a product (Schmitt, 1999, p. 53). Operating from a fundamentally psychological orientation toward the customer, experiential marketers are concerned with achieving a holistic experience for the customer. Through this inquiry, I will explore the notion that within the framework of experiential marketing, an effective **experience = environment + connection + values + risk**.

First, it is helpful to more clearly define experiential marketing. Wood (2009) defines experiential marketing as an *event* that enables marketers to market a product or service to a target audience (p. 248). While experiential marketing encompasses a wide array of marketing strategies, the common denominator is that marketers want the customer to experience the product, service, or brand by fully immersing him or her within it, engaging as many of his or her senses as possible. Personal interaction is key. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) were among the first to argue that customers are motivated by

emotion as often, if not more frequently, as they are by rational decision-making. Schmitt (1999) advanced this concept by describing five "strategic experiential modules" that managers could use to create experiences for their customers: sensory, affective, creative-cognitive, physical, and social identity (p. 60). Carù and Cova (2003) elaborated on experiential marketing design by investigating multiple definitions and typologies of "experience."

The strategies experiential marketers undertake to create an immersive experience can take the form of product visitor attractions (Dewar's World of Whisky), branded festivals and competitions (Mountain Dew's Dew Tour), and guerilla marketing (a Coca-Cola machine in Singapore which released free cans of soda upon receiving a hug from a human being) (Wood, 2009; "Ten Experiential Marketing Campaigns," 2012). Another way to conceptualize experiential branding is through the idea of "brandscapes," which describe flagship stores, themed retail environments, and some virtual spaces (Ponsonby–McCabe & Boyle, 2006, p. 183). Because experiential marketing relies upon customer sensorial and emotional immersion, entertainment, leisure, and recreation brands lend themselves particularly well to brandscapes (Ponsonby–McCabe & Boyle, 2006).

In his article "Enhancing the Application of Experiential Marketing In the Arts," Petkus (2004) describes the use of experiential marketing dimensions within a theater performance. The author posits that because the arts are almost always experiential in nature, they offer a unique opportunity to inform such a marketing strategy. It is important to here distinguish between experiential marketing strategies as they are used within for-profit businesses, and within arts organizations. There is no experiential aspect inherent to

goods; in the case of Dewar's World of Whisky, for example, an experience (a distillery and

museum) must be created somewhat artificially around a product (whisky). In contrast, an

arts organization may use experiential marketing to capture and enhance the natural

quality of the aesthetic experience innate to its product (a performance, for example).

Following Petkus' lead, I will discuss experiential marketing henceforth within this

framework of an arts organization's offerings.

Building on Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experiential marketing framework, Petkus

summarizes the four dimensions of the arts **experience** as: entertainment, education,

aesthetic, and escapist (2004, p. 51). What is of concern here are the aesthetic and escapist

dimensions, as these are the two that are the most likely to assist in immersion, even

engendering a "flowstate" experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

> **Experience:** a kinesthetic event, experience exists at the boundary between our
>
> body and the outside world. Objectively, experience is everything that our senses
>
> absorb. Subjectively, experiences are the pieces of those sensations to which we
>
> ascribe meaning. Experiences are carbon chains of phenomenon. (Marcus Renner)

Carù and Cova (2005) find that the aesthetic experience is both multidimensional

and subjective. Customers will respond differently to the same input, deriving "awareness

from their perceptions of external stimuli and from their intimate external spheres" (p. 40).

Petkus (2004) calls for the engagement of all the senses through artistic programming.

Various elements converge to create the total experience at a dance performance, for

example—from beverage and food sale, to the musical soundtrack, to dancers' bodies in

motion, to set design. While this perspective of experiential marketing is not strictly

marketing, per se, it serves to illustrate the essence of the marketing strategy. Traditional

marketing advertises the benefits and features of a product or service. However, in

experiential marketing, the event or occurrence can both advertise and *be* the product. If

marketers intentionally and effectively orchestrate elements of a performance to create an

immersive experience for the customer, the stronger the attachment that may be formed

between the customer and the brand (or performing arts company, in this example).

To investigate the immersive experience from a different angle, McLuhan (1967)

discusses the individual sensorial experience in terms of proliferation of technology and its

effect on the senses. Warning against the specter of sensory overload, he states: "Anything

that alters a sensory threshold alters the outlook and experience of a whole society." While

McLuhan speaks of television, computers, and the like, the author's emphasis on the

pervasive **environment** is worth noting here. Such is also the power of a "staged

[experiential] experience" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

> **Environment:** a constructed space that implores you to rest and immerse yourself
>
> in an experience. The appropriate environment will give an audience a memorable
>
> experience; all are affected in some way by the elements within it. All-
>
> encompassing, it surrounds and envelops. (Chelsey Thornton/Raquel Vargas
>
> Ramirez/Lydel Matthews/Marcus Renner)
>
> McLuhan (1967) states, "Environments are not just containers, but are processes

that change the contents entirely" (p. 165). The author emphasizes the power that

environment has, stating that "total and saturating" environments are indeed

imperceptible (McLuhan, 1967, p. 164). Again, while he refers to the pervasive

technological environment, this is the effectiveness of experiential marketing. The

environment may become all-encompassing, so that everything beyond the customer and

the experience of the product or performance dissolves. Carù & Cova (2005) state that the

aesthetic experience is "akin to diving into the deep end of the pool…a total immersion that

will transform the individual" (p. 39). In a framework for understanding the aesthetic

experience within a classical music concert, the authors identify various "service elements"

that impact customers, and included among these is the "servicescape," or design of the

environment (p. 50). However, Carù and Cova warn, the environment does not dictate the

aesthetic experience, but merely acts as a support structure that fades away once

immersion is achieved.

Another perspective advanced by Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle (2006) concerns

"atmospherics" in brandscapes, which are the "factors which may be designed into or

manipulated within brand spaces in order to produce emotional, and, in turn, behavioural

effects in consumers" (Foxall et. al, as cited in Ponsonby-McCabe & Boyle, 2006, pp. 183-

184). Slatten et. al (2006) concur, revealing study findings which suggest that the

atmospheric constructs of design and interaction are linked to a customer's feelings of joy,

and that this joy can be directly linked to customer loyalty. While the environment has the

potential to be hugely influential in experiential marketing, it must not be oppressive or

obvious to the customer; it must not stand in the way of the customer's **connection** to the

product or performance.

Connection: typically the consumer making some kind of emotional connection to

the product, but it is also connecting to an intended audience, and connecting that

audience with one another to build a network of supporters. A meaningful

interaction between people; an energy exchange. Fleeting, but tantalizing, and lures

the willing participant into a truly unique and spellbinding experience. (Erin

Zysett/Emily Volkmann/Alex Richardson/Bea Ogden)

Wood (2009) explains that the optimal experiential marketing event will leave

customers feeling an emotional connection to the brand: "The main benefits appear to be

again related to the emotional setting in which the brand message is delivered. The event

becomes the brand, representing the brand values in a physical and interactive form"

(emphasis mine; p. 263). Much in the way that the environment becomes secondary in an

effective experiential marketing experience, the brand may cease to be the center of the

experience when true connection with the customer is made. Furthermore, a customer may

establish an emotional connection within an arts setting more swiftly than in other "brand"

settings. In addition to connecting *with* the content of the performance, customers may

connect with one another *through* the content. Social capital may be generated in the form

of social bridging (connection of people to one another across differences) through

unexpected or novel moments of the experiential event.

Within the larger marketing realm, it is necessary to acknowledge that a customer

often connects to a brand in a virtual (online) environment. However, there is

disagreement as to whether experiential marketing can even occur in virtual environments.

Glickman (2011) suggests that the value of face-to-face, "senses-intensive" (p. 10)

experience, versus virtual experience. Like McLuhan, the authors Nansen, Arnold, Gibb and

David (2009) discuss "connectivity" in relation to the proliferation of media and

technology: "domestic spaces…are increasingly characterized by connectivity and the use

of information, communication, and media technologies, which have quietly attached

themselves to everyday domestic practices" (p. 182). Traditional marketers have taken

advantage of the possibilities that the state of customers being "always on" presents

(Nansen, Arnold, Gibb, & David, 2009); the popularity of social media marketing is a

testament to this. However, because the objective of experiential marketing is immersion

and engagement of all the senses, I contend that experience must be had in person in order

for true connection to occur.

Imparting a sense of **value** to a customer is also necessary to create an effective

experiential marketing experience. Indeed, defining the value of an arts experience is the

main task for all arts marketers.

> **Values:** can include the perceived worth of an event to a patron along these varied
>
> dimensions: monetary; social; educational; emotional/spiritual; and an intangible
>
> personal element. Personal experiences can inspire people and become
>
> irreplaceable. (Alex Richardson/Emma Hsu)

Pine and Gilmore (1998) explain that there have been four stages of economic value

in our current "experience economy:" commodities, goods, services, and experiences (as

cited in Schmitt, 1999, p. 54). Customers have come to expect experiences that

demonstrate the value of a particular product. Such experiences must offer the customer a

connection to the brand or product that will hold personal value to him or her. Sensory, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual value replaces functional value in this case. Because the arts, arguably, do not have a strictly functional value, they are again uniquely positioned to benefit from experiential marketing. Indeed, returning for a moment to the aesthetic experience, Holbrook (1994;1999; as cited in Ponsoby-McCabe & Boyle, 2006) identified eight types of value that can be derived from the consumption experience, two of which are aesthetics and spirituality (p. 180). Emotional and aesthetic value can directly correlate with monetary value, as well. Petkus (2004) states, "The implementation of a more robust arts experience might mean...that arts organisations would be able to charge more, as people realise the added value of a more complete arts experience" (p. 55). Further, as a customer's valuation of a brand increases, so does his or her brand loyalty (Wood, 2009, p. 252).

Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle (2006) state: "For some entertainment brands, the place experience of the brandscape is essential for creating the consumer value of the brand. That is to say, consumers pay for the experiences they derive from consuming the place. Where this is the case, the brand environment often takes the form of hyperreality" (p. 184). The authors state that when spiritual value arises from consumption, customers may be transported to a utopian place (p. 181). However, there is a **risk** inherent in this kind of customer proposition.

> **Risk:** a momentary sacrifice. What happens when one takes a chance; the potential emotional and physical costs to a consumer. Although dangerous, the results may be surprising or rewarding. (Lydel Matthews/Erin Zysett/Nori Rice)

When a customer decides upon a product or offering, he or she must assess his or her options based on several criteria. He or she brings his or her prior experience and reference points, likes, and interests. In addition, the customer will appraise the benefits, value, and risks or barriers to consumption. While immersion into an experience is generally assumed to have a positive psychological outcome, there is potential for a negative experience. Experiential marketers should acknowledge the power that they hold in creating what may be an overwhelming brand environment or experience—even within the realm of artistic programming.

A prerequisite to achieving a holistic experience is inciting emotion within the customer. Rossiter and Bellman (2012) define emotional branding as "the consumer's attachment of a strong, specific, usage-relevant emotion—such as Bonding, Companionship, or Love—to the brand" (p. 291). While an experiential marketer's main goal may not be tying a specific emotion to a brand or product, the emotional quality of the experience—uniquely created through the experience—is likely to create an association of emotion with the brand or event in the mind of the customer. As previously stated, the goal of experiential marketers is to create a memorable and emotional experience for a customer that will foster brand loyalty. It is largely assumed among arts programmers that their offerings are inherently proffered for the good of the people. While I do not wish to call the basic benefit of the arts into question, framing an aesthetic experience—potentially spiritual, and certainly emotional—as an opportunity to foster brand loyalty poses some ethical considerations. The proposition of a transcendent experience is risky for both the marketer and the customer. Yet, an element of the unexpected or of novelty is what makes

the experience so compelling for a customer. Thus, risk is a necessary component of experience.

This essay, which began with a brief overview of the ideological roots of experiential marketing, has suggested that an effective customer experience is created when the elements of environment, connection, values, and risk converge. Because these terms can hold multiple meanings, definitions were provided to assist in elaboration of the inherent benefits and tensions within the philosophy and practice of experiential marketing. Through the literature and examples presented, a conceptual framework has been offered that may be used to enrich the customer's experience during arts consumption activities. While experiential marketers seek to create an immersive experience based around a product, arts programmers need merely enhance their primary offering.

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