

Brand Purpose and Sustainability: The Role of Experiential Marketing in Building Brand-Consumer Relationships through Brand Purpose Sustainability Messaging

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Abstract

The confluence of relationship marketing with various areas of marketing theory is clear. In accepting its value as an area of practical value and academic interest, it is obvious that relationship marketing has a direct link with the sustainability agenda – potentially from several angles. This paper explores the connection of sustainability messaging with experiential marketing through the lens of brand-consumer relationships. Using qualitative and secondary data, this paper identifies the increasing prominence of sustainability as a brand purpose, in enriching relationships between brands and customers. With this, the potential of experiential marketing as a conduit for such messages is explored with some evidence presented that some practitioners are meaningfully constructing plans and mechanisms to indelibly imbue sustainability messaging through the intimacy of marketing relationships.

Keywords: *Sustainability Marketing, Experiential Marketing, Brand Purpose*

Track: *Relationship Marketing*

1. Introduction

This paper begins by overviewing the role of relationships in experiential marketing. While the area has been a focus for both practitioners and academics for some time – there remains some gaps in our understanding of same, mainly due to the relative lack of recent academic attention on experiential marketing. From there, the paper presents key perspectives on sustainability and marketing – emphasis is placed on definitional clarity and signposting of key outputs in this area. Through the findings, garnered from a qualitative study, this paper presents an argument that strengthens the links between a) brand/customer relationships and experiential marketing and b) experiential marketing and sustainability-oriented brand purpose messaging.

2. Relationships and the Role of Experiential Marketing

Building relationships with customers has been a cornerstone of business for centuries (Leahy, *et al.*, 2022), however it wasn't until the mid-late 20th century, that literature started to emerge exploring this core objective of attracting and keeping customers in the long term. This literature primarily focused on Industrial Marketing (Jackson, 1985) and Services Marketing (Berry, 1983), and it wasn't until the late 20th century / start of the 21st century that the concept was examined in the context of mass consumer markets (Dibb *et al.*, 2006; Sheth *et al.*, 2000; Petrof, 1997; Palmer, 1996; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). By now, various industries, including hospitality, transportation, banking, manufacturing, healthcare, utilities, retail *etc* had all focused on converting buyer behaviour from a fleeting casual encounter to a committed relationship. As such, marketing practice shifted from one focused on developing, selling and delivering products, to one where the focus was progressively more concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually satisfying relationships with customers (Parvatiyar and Sheth, 2000; Shani and Chalasani, 1992). Initially this focus was on the development of interpersonal relationships between buyer and seller, however, work by Aaker (1997) on brand personality, and by Fournier (1998) on brand anthropomorphization, was instrumental in moving the dialogue to one where the emphasis was on the development and maintenance of consumer - brand relationships.

Brand management literature, since this time, has been central to the development of much of our current knowledge on consumer – brand relationships. Key concepts such as brand loyalty (Uncles, *et al.*, 2003), brand trust (Dellagado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2001), brand love (Ahuvia, 2005), brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), brand

attachment and commitment (Fournier and Yao, 1997), and brand bonds (Fournier, 1998) have all been examined from the perspective of how they contribute to brand-consumer relationships. Drawing these studies together, it can be said that a significant brand provides meaning and is important to a person because it connects with their life, and they have behavioural, attitudinal and emotional involvement and attachment with that brand (Leahy *et al.*, 2022; Uncles *et al.*, 2003, Fournier, 1998). In such circumstances, it can be argued, that the goal of marketing strategy is the development and maintenance of brand–customer relationships. While all marketing communication techniques are important in this regard, research on experiential marketing is particularly significant (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016).

Experiential Marketing is defined as a customer-focused marketing approach that inherently incorporates identifiable brand-consumer interaction across the stages of consumption with a view to increasing emotional attachment as part of a relationship with the brand - while eliciting a measurable impact to both the consumer and the brand (Leahy *et al.*, 2022). According to McCole (2004), experiential marketing has the unique ability to aid in the development and maintenance of relationships between brands and consumers as its primary ambition is to create ongoing emotional attachment. Using experiential marketing, marketers create immersive methods of connecting with their audience (Smilansky, 2009). Relevant, immersive and relatable experiences that a consumer has with a brand (Levy and Guterman, 2021) cements the brand-customer relationship over the long term (Trudeau and Shobeiri, 2016).

As such experiential marketing is aligned to how brands want to connect with their consumers (Ding and Tseng, 2015). This is achieved through the enactment of memorable experiences that are strategically tailored to a specific target market (Mathwick *et al.*, 2001), which improve the customer's trust and commitment to the brand resulting in a longer-term relationship. Experiential dimensions such as sensory, emotions, imagery *etc* (Schmitt, 1999) are highly correlated with trust and commitment and thus with relationship quality. In essence, research studies have shown that there are significant links between experiential dimensions and benefits, and consumer – brand relationships (Park *et al.*, 2014; Park and Kim, 2014; Zena and Hadisumarto, 2012; Chou, 2009; Chang and Chieng, 2006). Experiential marketing, therefore, creates an opportunity for marketers to create memorable experiences where the consumption experience and the relationship it generates with the

consumer is the ultimate point of brand differentiation in an overcrowded marketplace (Schmitt, 2000; Holbrook, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Sherry, 1998).

3. Brand Purpose and Sustainability

Recent years have highlighted a significant increase in the need and desire for the point of a brand's differentiation to be focused on sustainability (Saxena & Seth 2022). The relevance of environmental protection and sustainability to consumers, firms and society as a whole, is influencing marketing strategy decision making, with organisations keen to be seen to be taking steps to improve behaviour in this regard (Dettori, 2019). How the concept of sustainability, however, interacts with the discipline of marketing is not yet firmly established, and has only recently been studied theoretically and conceptually (Davies *et al.*, 2020; Lunde, 2018). Of significance here, is that the role of marketing in potential or perceived 'greenwashing' is of such negative connotation that the discipline experiences cynicism or mistrust with respect to sustainability – it is often presented as the “antithesis of sustainability” (Lim, 2016). Over and above this, however, from a definitional perspective, there exists a nomenclature difficulty with the distinction between sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing. For clarity, sustainability marketing is marketing that is purely geared at an ecological or holistic concept of sustainability as distinct from sustainable marketing, which is marketing that is and of itself purposed around its own value as an activity in the context of the marketing of any product or service. The difference being, in essence, marketing for sustainability and marketing sustainably.

For the purposes of this paper, the researchers adopt the definition of sustainability marketing of Kumar *et al.*, (2013) who explicitly incorporates the sustainable development agenda as “building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment and the natural environment”. Building upon the relational aspect of this definition, this paper explores how experiential marketing is used in the FMCG sector to conduct and relay messages that progress the sustainability cause. Dettori (2019) proposed that the benefits of experiential marketing naturally lend towards the delivery of sustainability messages, but point out that the connection between “experience” and “sustainability” is only at an emergent stage and the relationship between the terms has not yet been studied. It is in this context that this paper is positioned, with a research question defined as:

Can experiential marketing be used to deliver brand purpose sustainability messages to build, maintain and enhance consumer-brand relationships?

4. Methodology:

The research method employed for this study is of a qualitative nature. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) a qualitative approach to research is interpretive, and one where it is the researcher's responsibility to produce the experience of research participants in a compelling manner, so those who read the study can comprehend the phenomenon at hand and enhance their understanding of it (Siedman, 1991). As such, it is critical to have the correct research participants involved in a qualitative study. To achieve this, a two-phased research study using purposive sampling has been employed. In the first research phase, industry practitioners who are involved in creating and executing experiential marketing for a brand were chosen to participate in the study. The focus on this research phase was on exploring the brand objectives set for an experiential marketing campaign. In the second research phase industry practitioners who are involved in planning experiential marketing campaigns, but who are also responsible for the overall company or brand sustainability objectives were chosen to participate in the study. Twenty-five interviews were conducted in total, with industry practitioners who were responsible for the experiential campaigns of fifty brands. See Table 1 for pool of brands profiled during interviews. Analysis of the empirical findings generated from these interviews are presented in the following sections. Individual contributions are de-identified to a category level.

Table 1: Pool of Brands Profiled

Fulfil	Coke	Tayto	Barrys Tea	Carling
Propercorn	Schweppes	Hula Hoops	Cadbury	Miller
Desperados	Monster Energy	O' Donnell's Crisps	Dairygold	Lucozade
Orchard Thieves	7up	Birds Eye	Kellogg's	Ribena
Heineken	Pepsi	Nestle Cereals	Heinz	Flahavans
Murphy's	Lipton	Nescafe	Lyons Tea	Dingle Gin
Coors Light	Club Orange	Purina	Breyer's Ice Cream	Sparkling Ice
Fire and Smoke	MiWadi	Bakers	Ben & Jerrys	Strong Roots
Deep Riverrock	Robinsons	Rowntrees	Lynx	Ballymaloe Relish
Fanta	Fruit Shoot	Nestle Chocolates	Franciscan Well	Orangina

5. Analysis of Findings: Relationships, Experiential Marketing and Sustainability Messages

The link between experiential marketing and relationship marketing has been established in the academic literature (for example, Zena and Hadisumarto, 2012; Chou, 2009; Mathwick et al., 2001) and affirmed through the empirical research in this study:

Experiential marketing is for the long-term benefit of the relationship with the brand, more than the short-term stuff. (Minerals, Regional Business Manager)

...then you move into building affinity and loyalty, that is where experiential plays a role. (Alcohol, Customer Experience Manager)

The research supports the view that through the use of experiential marketing, marketers create immersive methods of connecting with their audience. The experiences that a consumer has with a brand develops and builds the brand-customer relationship over the long term:

Experiential is about building that emotional engagement. 100%. It is a driver of brand power. It is a way of driving our loyalties and converting people, so moving occasional users up to regular users, regular users up to loyal users and keeping out loyal users there. (Chill, Marketing Manager)

In this way the consumption experience and the relationship it cultivates with customers acts as a point of differentiation for brands in overcrowded and competitive marketplaces. That point of differentiation however, is rooted in the brand messaging that permeates the experience. Consumers of today are more discerning in their consumption choices and engage with brands that they believe fit into their life choices and world view. Increasingly consumers connect with brands whose purpose reflects their own beliefs and attitudes. Experiential marketing is important in this context as:

It is a means of marketing where your brand or proposition is delivered to consumers through an experience. (Alcohol, Customer Marketing Manager)

Experiential allows the consumer to experience what the brand is and what it stands for. (Chill, Marketing Manager)

As articulated by Ding and Tseng, (2015), experiential marketing is aligned to how brands want to connect with their consumers. This theoretical proposition is reflected in the following practitioner quote:

What experiential does for us is brand purpose. Where we can build more purpose into our brand, as in ‘what is your reason, why are you adding back to society, what are you doing?’. That can really help drive sales and build a closer bond with our consumer. Experiential marketing really helps to build that. (Household Goods, Marketing Manager).

Increasingly brand purpose messages are about sustainability. The empirical research for this study demonstrates that experiential marketing can be used to deliver brand purpose sustainability messages.

Absolutely [you can build relationships with customers using sustainability] I think brands that don’t engage on sustainability will soon become irrelevant. (Ambient, Head of Marketing)

Currently sustainability is impacting on our marketing to a minor extent – but I expect this to grow in the coming 1-3 years – we are making some smaller decisions such as not printing our food service magazine – keeping it digital only. Trying to reduce any branded merchandise, especially plastic or trying to purchase better sourced branded merch. We have not yet worked many sustainability messages into our paid advertising, but have used it for organic content. We also aim to change this in the future. (Ambient, Sales and Marketing Manager)

Essentially it emerged from the research that industry practitioners are increasingly interested in the potential of experiential marketing to bring the sustainability brand purpose message to life, in a way that further enhances the consumer-brand relationship.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to determine if experiential marketing can be used to deliver brand purpose sustainability messages to build, maintain and enhance consumer-brand relationships and in so doing, more clearly establish the triad of connection between relationships, experience and sustainability as brand purpose. The findings from the research indicates that brand purpose and sustainability are becoming entwined. Coupled with the knowledge that experiential marketing and relationship marketing have a strong overlap, it can now be established that experiential marketing can be a useful conduit to building relationships on the basis of brand purpose, where that purpose is strongly and genuinely about sustainability. Future challenges relate to understanding the role of sustainability in brand purpose in more detail and thereby identifying the potential application of relationship marketing theory to the development of experiential marketing activities in seeking to espouse sustainability values.

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