

# Want to Set Your Brand Apart? Try Reality

Experience marketing touches consumers at a visceral level and cuts through the media clutter

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"All reality all the time." That's the tagline for the Fox Network's new 24/7 reality TV channel. Somehow I thought CNN was all reality all the time, but I guess that's a different kind of reality.

Whatever the case, there's no doubt that reality shows are here to stay. They touch people on a visceral level. Make a human connection. No actors, no scripts, no stunts or laugh tracks. Just ordinary folks like you and me trading houses, trading spouses and vying to be Donald, Martha or Paris.

All kidding aside, from my vantage point in the world of brands, the movement toward getting real is of critical importance when it comes to successful branding. With the proliferation of every product and service category imaginable, consumers need all the help they can get distinguishing one brand from another. As they get bombarded with sound bites from both traditional and nontraditional media, consumers need a new way to make sense of which brands offer them something different and meaningful and which don't. They need a new set of signals. They need experiential signals.

To effectively brand in today's marketplace you've got to seriously deploy what I'll conveniently call reality branding, a.k.a. experience marketing. That is, create actual situations for consumers that allow them to experience your brand in ways that give them the chance to truly appreciate what you stand for. To fully comprehend the benefits you offer and what they can expect from you if they choose to make a commitment. Reality branding is about touching people on a visceral level. Making that connection between perception and, well, reality. Not simply telling them what you do but letting them experience it before they plunk down the cash.

The very best brands understand the need for reality branding, and have found some very interesting ways of achieving their objectives. Take Nickelodeon, for example.

## Infusion

Nick, as we all know, is the world's leading entertainment brand for kids. Through its recent partnership with Holiday Inn, it's created the ultimate kid-friendly (and parent-friendly) hotel experience. For all intents and purposes, it's infused the essence of the Nick brand promise into specially selected Holiday Inns.

From suites decorated with the likes of SpongeBob SquarePants, Dora the Explorer and Cosmo to Studio Nick, a state-of-the-art theater presenting interactive family

entertainment, Nickelodeon Holiday Inns provide the most entertaining live-the-brand reality show one can imagine. The characters come to life and there's enough green slime for everyone (don't ask; just trust me-it's a good thing). As one young fellow was reported to have said in a recent press release, "I'm in Nick!" What could possibly be more real or experiential than that?

For the young at heart, on the other hand, a couple of automotive brands are taking reality branding on the road-and off. Land Rover, for instance, offers Retailer "Wheels" Driving Events, providing its clientele a unique opportunity to take advantage of all the unparalleled capabilities Land Rover has to offer.

In a similar way, BMW lends more proof to its Ultimate Driving Machine promise via its Performance Center Driving Schools, where participants are taught a wide variety of subjects from vehicle dynamics to effective cornering and safe-driver techniques. The programs, ranging from one day to two, some at classy resort destinations, provide hands-on experience with BMW's active-safety technology, strongly supporting the well-known attributes of the brand.

The good news is you don't need to go too far afield to give consumers a dose of reality branding. In fact, you can literally bring it home through an online experience. While most brands see the Internet as just another cost of doing business, a number of forward-thinking brands have figured out how to take full advantage of its technology.

"Ever wonder what you'd look like with a different cut, style or color?" queries Clairol's appealing site. Well, go ahead. Find out. Clairol's sassy "Try It On" studio lets you experiment to your heart and head's delight. Go red. Be bold. Go platinum blond. Do a new you without cost, care or embarrassment. It's Clairol's promise to be your "partner in beauty" made virtually and dramatically real.

Lands' End, too, which, from Day One, made customer service the hallmark of its brand, supports it with its own online reality show. The Virtual Model functionality designed for women and men (yes, we also want to know if it makes us look fat) makes it possible to "try on" clothing using a model that's almost a mirror image of yourself. The ability to try it before you buy it, yet another proof point of Lands' End's promise that what's good for the customer is good for the brand.

On another note (sorry), want to know if the new Coldplay single is worth downloading? Is Faith Hill more to your liking? Black-Eyed Peas? A little U2 perhaps? iTunes lets you sample it before you make it a permanent part of your play list. Amazon.com, as well, lets you read an excerpt before you have yet another book on the nightstand that gets eyed guiltily every evening before bed.

Telling isn't enough

Reality branding must take a greater role in brand building (no pun intended). As the marketplace gets more confusing, it will not be enough to tell consumers what your

product does, using even the flashiest ads or streaming media. If you're serious about setting your brand apart-which you should be-you need to create innovative experiences for consumers that bring your brand to life. You need to make use of reality, whether through a demonstration of performance or functionality, genuine evidence of customer service or an authentic and clever show of entertainment value.

While consumers may not really be looking to trade spouses or houses, they are looking for "reality," a real indication of what they can expect from you. The best marketers know this, and they're trading traditional media dollars for experiential dollars to make it happen.

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