

## L'esperienza nel marketing. La parola a Bernd Schmitt, teorico del marketing esperienziale.

L'inizio del terzo millennio ha visto l'affermarsi, soprattutto oltreoceano, del cosiddetto "marketing esperienziale".

A teorizzarlo è stato Bernd Schmitt con il testo *Experiential Marketing*, nel quale ha proposto un quadro concettuale e operativo finalizzato alla gestione dell'esperienza del consumatore attorno a beni e servizi. Arrivato in Europa, il marketing esperienziale è diventato oggetto d'interesse da parte sia del mondo accademico che di quello aziendale. È stato elogiato e criticato, scatenando così un vero e proprio "vespaio" di opinioni, punti di vista e teorie.



**In esclusiva per la comunità di Brandforum** è stato chiesto a Bernd Schmitt, alla luce della sua esperienza come professore presso la Columbia University di New York e consulente aziendale per l'EX Group, qual è la sua posizione al riguardo e quali risultati ha raggiunto il marketing esperienziale sino a oggi.

**Professor Schmitt, after publishing the best-seller *Experiential Marketing* five years ago, in which you introduced the basis of a new marketing paradigm, what impact do you believe experiential marketing has had on companies? What about academic research?**

I am happy and proud to say that the impact has been strong and it has been across industries and across countries. Aside from my own consulting work with companies, I am constantly getting emails from around the world. These emails come from managers that have used experiential marketing, and my framework in particular, in industries as diverse financial businesses, airlines or supermarkets. Some use the approach as part of strategic planning, others to revive the brand, and others for new product development. As you know, the approach is not tactical event management but a rich new marketing and management paradigm. So, in terms of influencing what companies do, experiential marketing has been very successful. It really seems to add value to companies. Academically, too, I get more and more papers to review that focus on experiential marketing and I am doing research in the area myself. Academics, too, feel increasingly that traditional marketing, focusing just on functional features and benefits, is not enough.

**Which are the most significant examples of American companies that pursue an experiential strategy?**

There are several. Apple has done a great job since Steve Jobs came back to the company in the late 1990s. They have launched the iMac and iPod; both products are innovative and add new experiences to people's lives. In banking, Commerce One and Washington Mutual have done amazing things in the retail environments, when most bankers felt that retail is dead and that online banking alone is the future. I think amazon.com is doing great online experience management. Finally, there is Starbucks, by now a classic of experiential marketing. You Italians may laugh but Americans love that brand. They now get a quality coffee (though it may not be as good as your espressos), and also lots of product innovation (think of the "iced frappuccino") as well as innovation in the stores (such as accessing to the internet, CDs, music stations for burning your own CDs etc).

**Experiential marketing has often been assimilated either to the logic of sensory stimulation inside stores or to the organization of spectacular events. How do you judge these two points of view?**

Well, those who do that have not read my books. I know there are some people who use the term in that narrow sense, for example, Pine and Gilmore in *The Experience Economy*. Despite the word "economy"

in the title, their framework – the “theater metaphor” – applies only to certain environments such as theme restaurants and events. I think this is using the term “experience” much too narrowly, and in fact underplays the importance of managing experiences. For me, experiences can be created in product design, packaging, on web sites, in communications and in service interactions. That’s what I research and write about and that’s what I help companies to achieve – an integrated experience, you know.

**In Europe, especially in France, experiential marketing has been strongly criticized. It has been said that companies cannot “plan” consumer experiences, given that – this way – they limit individuals’ freedom and do not recognize their active role in consumption activities. How do you answer to such criticism?**

I fully recognize in my own work the active role of consumers. Experiences happen when consumers perceive products and brands and act and relate to them. “Planning experiences” therefore must mean offering the customers opportunities and not manipulating them. In fact, the best experiential brands, like Apple that I mentioned earlier and I could add Harley-Davidson, the MINI car brand and many others, have active user communities. But at the same time, these brands are also very well managed by the company. And their consumers do not seem to mind at all. They do not find their freedoms limited in any way. It is like in great art. Great artists – poets, composers, writers – work within the constraints of an art form, but they do not feel restricted by it. In fact, the very constraint in form of expression takes their art to another level. I believe creative consumers feel the same way, and having a great experience requires active, creative involvement by the consumer.

**The concept of “experiential marketing”, in its evolution, has led to consider the experience that consumers live with goods and services as the fulcrum of the whole company strategy. Is it correct to talk about “brand experience”? What do you mean with this expression?**

I prefer “customer experiences with the brand.” Managing experiences is all about customer insight and developing strategies and implementations out of this understanding of the customer. I help companies doing that and call my latest framework “customer experience management” or “CEM.” Most branding unfortunately is not done in a customer-centric way. When brand experts develop brand values, brand visions, brand personalities or whatever, they usually talk to management only. They only speak the language of management. As a result, branding often misses the point: the outcome is self-serving, generic and quite meaningless. As a result, managers do not know what to do at the end of most branding projects. If they use the CEM framework, however, they need to confront the customer. And they need to implement the customer insight in their branding (and that’s then a “brand experience”) as well as in the customer interface where they interact with customers.

**In which directions do you believe works on experience will go? Are there any issues that should be studied more in depth?**

Experience management and marketing is ultimately about the organization. It requires that an organization is organized differently than most organizations today: we must start with the customer and create organizational processes and human resource policies that focus on customers. Most of my consulting work these days has an organizational component. Moreover, companies and academics need to develop methodologies that link customer experience to life-time customer value (also called “customer equity”). In these two directions, I believe we will see significant managerial and academic work in the future.