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The theater of the brand: Building entertainment experiences at retail



In the ongoing battle to attract and retain consumer mindshare, retailers are increasingly turning to innovative marketing mediums to engage and stay top-of-mind with consumers. Gone are the days of unlocking the door and turning on the radio; today's retailers are pressing fast-forward to fully customized soundtracks. Paper POP table tents and static signage are being replaced by sophisticated digital media networks.

Smart companies are implementing ways to take the in-store experience beyond the lease line to extend brand affinity, drive consumer behavior and provide relevant lifestyle content to the consumer. All these advancements aim to enhance the shopping experience, lifting it to more than just a trip to a store, but rather a theatrical experience where purchasing merchandise is only part of the journey.

Not only are these solutions successful at engaging consumers, but they have also been proven to extend dwell time and increase brand awareness – key factors in ongoing loyalty and long-term buying relationships. Keeping consumers inside the store is even more important today than it has been in past years. The current economic downturn has meant a loss in revenue, so on those days when consumers are out and about, it is imperative that a retailer attract them, keep them in store, and close the sale. Just as important is that, as your customers go mobile, so must your brand.

A recent Retail Systems Research report ("Walking the Razor's Edge: Managing the Store Experience in an Economic Singularity," June 2009) states 70 percent of retailers surveyed said they use in-store technologies to maintain or improve the customer experience and extend that experience past the lease line. According to the same report, two-thirds of the retailers surveyed said they have reduced their payrolls in the wake of the economic slide, but those same two-thirds of retailers surveyed have not changed the expenditures devoted to in-store technology.

So, what are some key elements of the "store as theater" retailers can take advantage of to increase mindshare, and stay connected and engaged with their customers?

The eyes have it

Digital signage is becoming the fastest-growing segment of retail media and advertisers are taking note; a 2007 Forrester survey found 72 percent of advertisers are looking at in-store media as an alternative to traditional advertising. In-store digital signage has the power to effectively relay brand messages to consumers by providing the message diversification needed to captivate shoppers in a new way.

With digital signage networks, advertisers can target consumers in different parts of a store, in different locations, in different ways, at different times of the day, delivering some of the most target-specific visual marketing yet. For example, signage content at an athletic retailer might run footage and/or related product advertising in the footwear section of the store, while the exercise equipment section highlights an instructional video on a specific piece of equipment. According to industry research, in-store messaging drives a 40-percent uptick in sales. It does this because it has the ability to be personal and connect with a consumer on a different level.

Digital signage increases traffic, which in turn increases the capacity to capture the consumer. Gaining a shopper's attention by placing that consumer into the messaging is a key factor in increasing brand awareness and sales. For instance, a person who is passionate about surfing may see themselves as the focal point of a sign on display at their local surf shop. They connect with the image and are therefore drawn to that store, creating a more loyal following.

They're all ears

Much like digital signage has the ability to draw a shopper's attention through visual elements, music attracts consumers through emotion and sound. Customized playlists that put brand to music have the ability to focus on specific demographics, catering to a certain genre and style while staying true to your brand essence. And with choices ranging from commercial satellite subscriptions and pre-arranged "mixes" to regularly updated fully custom programming, there is an option to fit every environment and budget.

In-store music is another area that has benefitted from technology. While many retailers still opt for their programming to be delivered via CD, more and more are choosing to have their tunes delivered over the Internet. Internet delivery has a number of advantages, including ease-of-use and fewer requirements of the on-site store employees. More sophisticated systems/services even allow for track selection and message insertion right from a Web browser.

In selecting a music provider, it is vital to make sure their service enables a level of customization that will fit your current and future needs. Things like day-parting — arranging music for different vibes to coincide for different times of the day — and a true understanding of how to convey your brand via music can make or break the in-store experience. Finally, make sure your chosen provider is current with their licensing agreements. In-store music is "public performance", and leading providers can handle all licensing so you know you're legal.

Brand on the run

It is more important than ever that retailers implement strategies to take the in-store experience to consumers, wherever they are, to extend brand engagement beyond the lease line. This "anywhere concept" truly extends the lease line of a retailer by allowing consumers to be exposed to branded entertainment media at any moment, whether its an hour or a week after the consumer has left the store.

Mobile, Web radio, branded podcasts, artist promotions and compilation CDs are powerful vehicles for reaching consumers. They provide the means to remain engaged with consumers across multiple touch points, while delivering personalized content that extends brand visibility and affinity. Whether cooking dinner in their kitchen, out for a jog, or sitting in their cubicle at work, an entertainment media campaign keeps your brand in front of consumers on their terms, making sure you stay top-of-mind.

Retailers that can target consumers with multiple touch points at various points of the day and week, in various locations and regions, with branded content and messaging are the retailers who become most successful. These retailers have learned that, for consumers, the shopping experience is not just about selling products — it's about creating a shopping experience which is fun and exciting, and establishes a true brand connection.

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