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A Strategic Approach to Amplifying an Experiential Event using Social Currency to Reach a Mass Audience

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Given the rise in popularity in the use of experiential marketing (Moderne Communications, 2014), it is timely to establish from the marketing practitioners' perspective, the strategic approach necessary to amplify experiential events using social currency to reach a mass audience in the FMCG sector. By introducing the FMCG marketer's perspective into the discussion on experiential event marketing, this research offers an insight into how brands are activating this marketing activity.

Based on the analysis of interviews profiling fifty brands in the FMCG sector, preliminary findings suggest that the success of an amplification strategy for an experiential event in FMCG markets, is dependent on the application of a time phase approach, and the use of four critical success factors. Collectively, these findings contribute to the development of the Experiential Event Amplification Framework. This framework contributes to the gap in the literature on experiential event marketing in the FMCG sector. Given the perception that experiential event marketing is an expensive practice which can negatively impact ROI (Supovitz, 2013), this research contends that the Experiential Event Amplification Framework provides practitioners with a strategic approach, whereby the ROI of this marketing activity can become more efficient, reaching the mass audience globally.

Track: Retail Marketing

1. Background and Context

Companies in the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector encompass manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers of products including food, drink, ambient products and consumables. Products of this nature sell quickly and have a short shelf life deriving from consumer demand or due to product quality deteriorating rapidly (Bahl and Chandra, 2018). Resulting from the predominance of low margins and the competitive nature of the sector, for FMCG brands to be successful, a company must have an in-depth knowledge of evolving consumer requirements, a strong distribution network along with the ability to market the product in a way that encapsulates the consumer's interest (Shaout and Khalid, 2014). Employing alternative methods of marketing communications, allows brands to break the industry clutter. As part of a corporate marketing strategy, one such method of breaking through this clutter is through the use of experiential marketing (Navrátilová and Milichovský, 2015). The most basic definitions point to experiential marketing as a tactic which is utilised by a business to combine an experience with elements of entertainment into the offering, with the intention of reinforcing the product or service in the consumer's mind (Lee *et al.*, 2011; Atwal and Williams, 2009; Yuan and Wu, 2008; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Companies that practice experiential marketing take a brand's essence and implement it in the form of an event, experience or interaction. This in turn will allow consumers to understand the brand at an intimate level by being active, rather than passive, participants (Gautier, 2003). Smilansky (2009) further explains that in order for experiential marketing to offer the optimal return for a brand, it must be integrated into the larger marketing strategy and involve two way communication between the brand and the target audience.

The concept of experiential marketing can be applied to multiple disciplines including retailing, branding and event marketing (Williams, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the research will specifically relate to experiential event marketing in the FMCG sector. In the current competitive business environment, companies are searching for methods of appealing to customers and the use of events has emerged as a channel for such efforts (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2013). This is due to the ability of an experiential event to create authentic experiences that generate high levels of audience engagement (Tafasse, 2016). Event marketing can be defined as "a communication tool whose purpose is to disseminate a company's marketing messages by involving the target groups in experiential activity" (Drenger *et al.*, 2008: 138), and as stated by Shimp, it is "the practice of promoting the interest of an organization and its brands by associating the organization with a specific activity" (Shimp, 1993: 8). However, it is important to note that the practice of experiential event marketing is perceived as being expensive and is some cases, is seen to negatively affect the potential return on investment (ROI) of a marketing activation (Supovitz, 2013).

The exponential growth in the application of experiential marketing can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, in today's social environment, individuals prefer to tell people about an occurrence in their life, and secondly, they now have the ability to do this and amplify their experience on social media (Perrett, 2016). Combining the power of both online and offline experiences results in consumers being "informed, networked, empowered and active" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004: 5). Word of mouth marketing (WOMM) is essential in this endeavour. WOMM is the "international influence of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010: 71). WOMM is also referred to as amplified word of mouth (WOM), social media marketing, viral marketing, buzz and guerrilla marketing (Sernovitz, 2012; Hinz *et al.*, 2011; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010; Liabai *et al.*, 2010; Rosen, 2009; Trusov *et al.*, 2009, Jaffe, 2007; Kelly, 2007; Sernovitz, 2006). By employing WOMM tactics, the marketing effort can transcend beyond a planned experiential

event itself to increase the potential reach on social media platforms, therefore, 'supercharging' the experience (Perrett, 2016). By one participant sharing a message, image or video from the event, the experiential campaign has the potential to go viral over-night. Through social media, society has progressed from having the ability to tell a friend, to having the tools to tell ten million (Gillin, 2007). These interactions are referred to as a brand's social currency. Social currency provides brands with the opportunity to amplify their experiential event as participants are incentivised to share content from the event. Although the use of WOMM and social currency is essential in disseminating an experiential event, Smilansky (2009) identifies that brands should also utilise digital, public relations (PR), advertising and live broadcast in order to amplify the activation to reach the mass audience.

Despite much research in the area of experiential event marketing, there is a dearth of research in the area of experiential event marketing in the FMCG sector. This paper presents important information in helping to bridge that gap, by establishing from the marketing practitioners' perspective, the strategic approach necessary to amplify experiential events using social currency to reach a mass audience in the FMCG sector.

2. Methodology

The research method employed for this study is of a qualitative nature. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that this approach to research is comprised of an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the social world. It involves the observation of research subjects in their natural settings, seeking to correlate or interpret a phenomenon in terms of a participant's response to the research topic being investigated. These previously stated features make the collection of qualitative data ideally suited to the current study where the focus is on exploring experiential events in the FMCG sector. In-depth interviews with marketing representative from companies who adopt experiential marketing methods was established as the best way to accumulate this data.

As it is the researcher's responsibility to produce the lived 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), it is critical to have the correct research participants involved in a qualitative study. To achieve this, purposive sampling has been employed, where industry practitioners who are involved in creating and executing experiential marketing for a brand were chosen to participate in the study. Twenty-two interviews were conducted, with industry practitioners who were responsible for the experiential campaigns of a combined total of fifty brands. The following statistics depict the diverse nature of the pool of brands profiled, which can be seen in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: 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	Sparking Ice
Fire and Smoke	MiWadi	Bakers	Ben & Jerrys	Strong Roots
Deep Riverrock	Robinsons	Rowntrees	Lynx	Ballymaloe Relish
Fanta	Fruit Shoot	Nestle Chocolates	Franciscan Well	Bulmers

According to the most recent study conducted by Consultancy UK (2018) on the top fifty FMCG companies globally by scale, the follow data emerged relating to the research pool.

- 3 of the top 10 brands are included in this interview pool
- 8 of the top 30 brands are included in this interview pool
- 10 of the top 50 brands are included in this interview pool

Out of the fifty brands profiled in this research:

- 8 brands have distribution in over 50 countries
- 2 brands have distribution in over 100 countries
- 11 brands have distribution in over 150 countries

Synthesis of the empirical data has resulted in two dominant findings relating to the strategic approach necessary to amplify experiential events using social currency to reach a mass audience in the FMCG sector. These are:

1. Application of a time phase approach,
2. Critical success factors to the amplification strategy.

The following section presents these findings.

3. Findings
3.1 Application of a time phase approach

When questioned on the amplification process of experiential marketing, responses categorically focused on the importance of approaching the matter from distinct time phases. In line with the views of O'Dell (2001), the amplification of an experiential event was not considered to occur in one calculated swoop, but over three distinct time periods.

> *It is before, during and after that it is important to amplify it [an experiential event] through digital channels (Miller, Customer Experience Manager).*

However, building on the work of O'Dell (2001), this study identifies that each of these time periods must have their own specific objectives. The dominant attitude expressed by brand representatives was that by strategically adopting a time phase approach, marketers have the opportunity to ensure that the message is effectively amplified to the mass market.

Planning for the 'before' phase is essential as the volume of attendance at the experiential event is closely linked to how it is activated during this 'before' phase.

> *If we have an event that is happening and you try to use your social channels, they are fans that are already there and following you and your conversation and if we are going to be in UCD Freshers Week or we have a pop up cinema coming, it means that you have got people who are already open to being there (Lipton, Marketing Manager).*

Some brand representatives referred to this activity as 'pre-seeding'. Utilising social media in the 'before' phase, allows a brand to communicate with their target market ensuring that there is no wasted media spend on individuals that do not identify with the brand or do not fall into the target market.

> *What we do in PepsiCo is we would usually geo-target. So, if we have events, there is no point in telling the country if they can't go (Pepsi, Marketing Manager).*

It is essential that the 'before' phase is utilised to inform the target market about the experiential event and also to generate interest and conversation.

In the second phase of experiential event amplification it is essential that social platforms are utilised to ensure that the experiential event does not merely exist in the moment but can be experienced remotely or even post the event.

> *...we made a video of it and then we amplified that through our social channels so you might not have necessarily been at the experiential or seen it but you had the moment where you realised that the whole experience actually took place (7up, Marketing Manager).*

However, this is the phase that brands typically find the most challenging due to the fact that they cannot actively control it.

> *Often during experiential, you are too busy to even be promoting it massively but pre and post is where the magic happens (Fire and Smoke, Marketing Manager).*

In this 'during' phase, brands typically will have to rely on event participants or as previously stated by Smilansky (2009), digital, PR, advertising or live broadcast to amplify the activation to reach the mass audience. Typically, brands will primarily rely on event participants to amplify the event, however, in order to encourage this participation, multiple brand representatives noted the importance of creating a 'hook'.

> *You have to have some sort of hook on the day that encourages them [event participants] to do it [amplify the event]. Social currency is evolving and even if the hashtag is a must for your event, encourage them to do it [amplify the event] by giving them an incentive so they might win something (Fulfil, Marketing Manager).*

As previously stated, not all brands are necessarily actively promoting their event while it is live so in order for content to be created, it is essential to ensure that the activation is still being amplified. The content created and disseminated in this phase can affectively be employed in the 'after' phase. Although the event itself is where the content is created to populate this last phase, the 'after' phase tends to have the most impact on the potential success of an experiential event.

> *It is definitely about the experience you are creating on that said night, weekend or whatever it is, but the real power is afterwards (Carling, Customer Marketing)*

During the 'after' phase, the content showcasing the experiential event can be amplified typically in the form of a video. When shared on social media, this allows the activation to transcend the physical barriers of the offline event and shares it with the mass audience. During this phase it is also essential for brands to interact with event participants who interacted with the brand online, particularly through social currency mechanisms. Table 3.1 summarises the objectives of the time phase approach as presented here.

Table 3.1: Objectives of a Time Phase Approach.

Before	During	After
• Pre-seed content	• Transcend the physical barriers of experiential event marketing	• Sum up the event
• Advertise the upcoming event to a targeted audience	• Crowd source content	• Promote future events
	• Adopt social currency	• Interact with individuals who participated

Source: Barry, (2019)

3.2 Critical success factors to the amplification strategy

As discussed earlier, Smilansky (2009) identified that brands should utilise digital, public relations (PR), advertising and live broadcast in order to amplify an activation to reach the mass audience. The empirical findings to this research indicate that Smilansky's (2009) offering should be updated to include four Critical Success Factors (CSF), necessary for the amplification process. These CSF are as follows.

     i.   Social Media
    ii.   PR
   iii.   Media Partnerships
   iv.   Influencer Marketing

In order for a brand to effectively amplify an experiential event to the mass audience in the FMCG sector, there must be multiple media streams utilised. Although this can prove costly, the combined potential reach of these media streams, allows for the activation to reach global publicity, which in turn contributes positively to the overall financial return.

> *The cost per contact or the conversation per contact is quite high and expensive. But, if it is wrapped up in a big communications plan that you can then drive reach on, then a much larger group of consumers get to see the content and are influenced by it. Then your ROI becomes a lot more efficient (Kellogg, European Marketing Director).*

This sentiment was shared by the majority of brand representatives. In line with Smilansky's (2009) finding, social media and PR were identified as the two factors which have traditionally being used to amplify the experiential event.

> *If you think about the experiential activity, it is about the engagement piece and I think what social media and PR do then is give it scale. It allows the campaign to appeal to a slightly wider audience (Cadbury, Marketing Manager).*

Indeed research participants discussed how the application of social media and PR resulted in a doubling of attendance at an experiential event on a daily basis. Although the previously aforementioned social media and PR can be viewed as generic amplification tools, the second two critical success factors (media partnerships and influencer marketing) identified in this research, offer brands the opportunity to specifically target certain audiences.

> *We do this [amplification] through social but also through media partnerships and influencers, they would be really key (Lyons Tea, Head of Marketing).*

Influencer Marketing, has been developed as an addition to WOMM, where brands interact with consumers through the medium of influencers who have a large number of followers on social media platforms (Khamis *et al.*, 2017). Through their large social following, influencers have the ability to amplify an experiential event to their audience, contributing to interactions with the mass audience.

> *Across the day, we probably had less than 100 people between the event in the morning and the event in the afternoon. By having Vogue Williams and Rob Lipsett there and by having them do Insta stories and posts, having media there as well to cover it and our own social media, we ended up reaching about 22 million consumers (Breyers Ice cream, Head of Marketing).*

By combining the critical success factors with the time phase approach, this research presents a framework for brands to effectively amplify experiential events. The proposed model, (Figure 3.1) builds on the network coproduction model developed by Kozinets *et al.*, (2010). The framework presented in Figure 3.1 depicts the role of the critical success factors in the time phase approach.

Figure 3.1: Experiential Event Amplification Framework
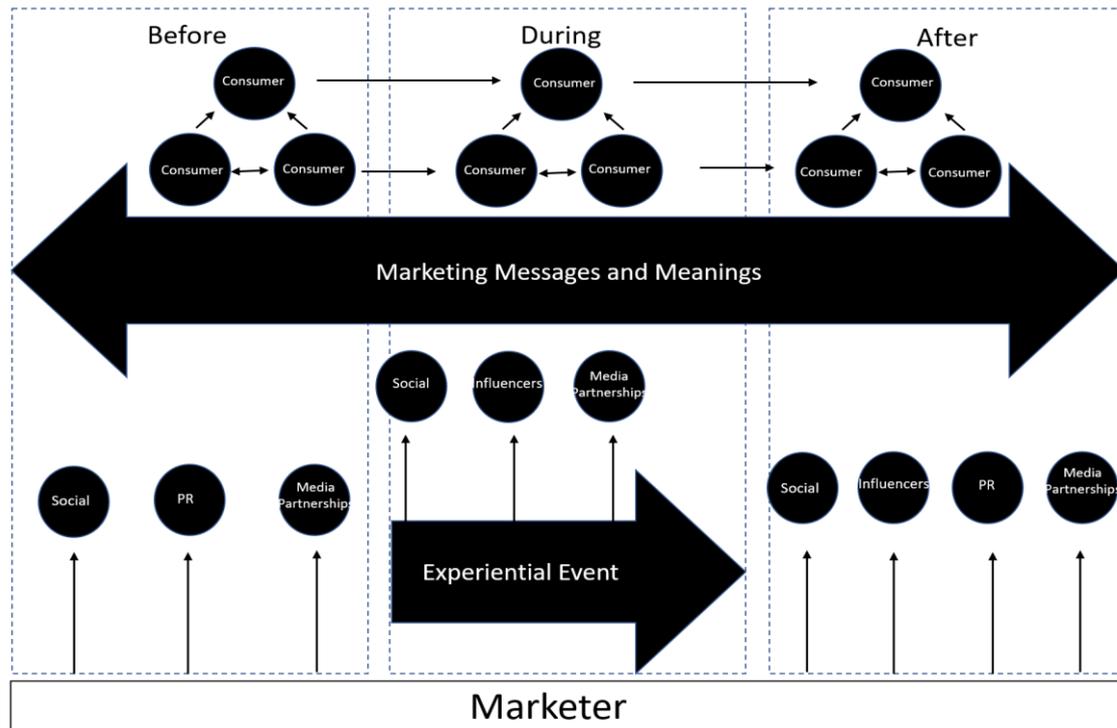
Source: Barry, (2019)

4. Conclusions & Implications

This paper set out to establish from the marketing practitioners' perspective, the strategic approach necessary to amplify experiential events using social currency to reach a mass audience in the FMCG sector. In-depth analysis of the interviews revealed that the success of an amplification strategy in FMCG markets, is dependent on the application of a time phase approach, and the effective use of four critical success factors. Collectively, these findings contributed to the development of the Experiential Event Amplification Framework, as presented in Figure 3.1. This framework is a significant contribution to the gap in the literature on experiential event marketing in the FMCG sector. Given the perception that experiential event marketing is an expensive practice which can negatively impact ROI (Supovitz, 2013), this research contends that the Experiential Event Amplification Framework provides practitioners with a strategic approach, whereby the ROI of this marketing activity can become more efficient, reaching the mass audience globally.

By introducing the FMCG marketer's perspective into the discussion on experiential event marketing, this offers an insight into how brands are activating this marketing activity in the current competitive marketplace. As such, the conclusions of this study challenge both academic practitioners and industries perception on how to efficiently and strategically amplify experiential marketing to the mass audience.

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