

What does a successful brand really sell? - By Rick Hendrie

2005-12-15

According to a column in the December 11th Boston Globe, The National Basketball Association is considering ways to tone down the noise at NBA games by testing 'silent nights. In this scenario, the only noise in the house would be generated from the game and the stands. When told of this, one of the more marketing savvy owners said, 'We don't sell basketball. Going to a game is about having fun, not comparing how team plays to what the scouting report says.'

What does a successful brand really sell? The New York Times had an article covering how the 5th Avenue Abercrombie & Fitch store merchandises its jeans, sweaters and rumpled button downs. The author made it clear: Abercrombie, in truth, sells quasi-illicit, nightclub drenched permission for adolescents to have sex without actually doing anything. The store has created a multi-floor nirvana for teens to congregate and cast, 'eager gazes at one another from beneath eyelids at studied half mast.' The staff is separated from the customers only by the tell tale 'plumping' of the occasional sweater. It's 'Gomorrah A Go-Go'.

Now, the idea of a store using sex to sell is not news. What is interesting is the degree to which A & F has designed an environment of such singular focus. At Abercrombie & Fitch, a clothing sale is but a by-product of the experience. Now, mind you, the clothes themselves are not that special in their design or daring. It's still denim and khaki, plaid and flannel. So what has 'added the value' to essentially commodity products, is the experience. And not just a heightened experience whose purpose is to raise the dial on great shopping (you know, killer service, wide selection, interesting displays, etc). No this is an experience which transports the consumer into a world of the id unleashed, where the pleasure and sensation centers of the brain run the show. It's here that A & F has decided to play. Interestingly, A & F PR folk apply food and beverage metaphors to various sections of the store ('Come to ze denim bar, my sweet. '), tying the sensual acts of communal eating and drinking to the process of buying some jeans. We're not talking the wholesome breaking of bread or the pouring of table wine either, but the kind that might be sold and shared in an after hours cavern, where decadence comes with the meal like garnish. Brilliant! I'm not here to judge the social values represented. I just want to acknowledge the genius of getting to what it is teens want (contact in all its colors) and attaching a clothing line to those feelings. When kids think t-shirts or ball caps, it's the frontal lobe of their brain which will kick in. Buying ain't logical, it's experiential. On top of it, A & F can sell their commodity for a premium, because their pants are a stand in for the pleasures of the flesh. Whether it's Disney selling the magic of being royalty in its Princess Court or Starbucks selling refuge in a Euro-style coffee bar, marrying a wish born of primal emotions to a product or service (make me a princess, find me a partner to bed or take me away 'to ze casbah'), and you have a powerful brand.

Now the NBA is teetering back and forth from a conventional point of view (We're about 'the game') to the A & F model. The only problem is that they don't have the conviction of their instincts. That owner is right. Most consumers do not go to a NBA game for the purity of sport, but for the gut wrenching, head spinning fun of a three ring extravaganza, with basketball occupying center stage. The issue maybe that some venues mistake special effects for powerful 'affect'. The key to understanding what you're really selling is to be sure you get that it's always going to be about the emotion. Special effects for effects sake only serve to disorient and disturb the consumer. Hollywood has proven that. No, every choice should serve the emotional note you want to play in your guest's brain. The amygdala, the brain's equivalent to Las Vegas, responds to and remembers brands that evoke feeling and sensation.

So what are the guidelines?

1. Re-positioning is an oxymoron. Your Position is, in fact, what your guest thinks and feels you are, regardless your opinion. You are what you are, so you had better be what you are to the Nth degree, to be remembered by an overwhelmed consumer. It suggests you had better know what your consumer feels before you throw money around. Is change possible? Only to the degree that your guest believes it possible. Or if you have a billion dollars for advertising.
2. You need to sell what people feel about you. Never confuse the facts of your product or service with the emotions they evoke or the feeling you want to touch in your guest. Thus, Fuddrucker's is selling 'doing your own thing' in service to creating a world class hamburger. The Ritz is selling its capacity 'to make you feel well', while providing elegant, luxurious accommodation. So, when in doubt, go with the feeling.
3. The physical plant of your business must serve or support the feeling, not just the facts. Abercrombie & Fitch has its denim bar. Whole Foods its magnificent abundance of organic produce and fruit to communicate 'health and abandon'. The place should stimulate the senses to evoke the feeling.
4. Your advertising should support what your guest feels, not just what you sell. Harley Davidson speaks of brothers and sisters riding the open road together. The mechanics of a great bike come much later.
5. You need to be sure that the feeling and sensations you evoke are pleasurable. Human beings are in the pain avoidance business. Ignore that basic truth at your peril.

My belief is that success businesses sell some version of happiness, with an infinite variation on that theme. Not a bad place to be in these times.

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This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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