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Leisure design and the art of branding

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Abstract

The basis of this paper is a presentation the author made in June 2001 on the experience of creating a corporate design project aimed at extending brand awareness. Consulting to leisure and development industries has revealed that the philosophies and methodologies behind the development and execution of successful entertainment projects have direct application to corporate design and mixed-use developments. This paper examines these unique processes through relevant projects experienced by the author.

INTRODUCTION

When asked why the musical *The Lion King* was so successful, the director Julie Taymor replied, 'People came for the story, the images, the music, and then they got something else. That's the ultimate thrill, to give people what they didn't know they even wanted.'¹ In Ms Taymor's case, she gave them progressive theatre and puppetry, not necessarily big sellers for the mass market. However, she made it work on a grand scale, and succeeded in creating an engaging experience that pushed beyond the boundaries of what her audiences had anticipated.

For designers, developers and operators of brand-extending venues, there is an opportunity here, a challenge, to create destinations, experiences and places that transcend expectations to be more than just structural advertisements. These venues need to be infused completely with all the qualities and aspects that uniquely characterise the brand itself. What follows is one consultant's experience in the art of branding.

THE STORY

So here is the challenge: a corporation has hired you. They want a venue that tells their story. A place that extends their brand further into the market-place. What does one do? What is the answer? Experience, and perhaps an active imagination, suggest that the solution lies in a design that combines Ms Taymor's philosophy of providing hidden surprises with the creation of immersive environments that speak to (and in fact subtly are) the message of the brand.

Certainly the creation of immersive environments is not a new concept. The use of immersive design tools has been a storytelling device prized by the theatrical community and the theme-park

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industry for years. However, the idea of using immersive design to entice an audience with known elements and then giving them something new they did not know they wanted makes for an interesting way to broaden a brand's appeal.

IMMERSIVE DESIGN IN ACTION

Adventurers club

The use of immersion as a design methodology creates opportunities for a designer to stage an experience, while at the same time encouraging the audience members to interpret the experience personally. A pioneering example of immersive design is the Adventurers Club, which made its debut in Orlando, Florida during the late 1980s. This much-emulated, non-theme-park project was conceived and built by the Walt Disney Imagineering Company as part of a large entertainment development on Walt Disney World property called Pleasure Island. Still going strong, this 'club' combines elements of live theatre, animation, environmental theming, audio effects, special effects and secret passageways to immerse an unsuspecting audience seamlessly into a story rich in historical imaginings and clever, endearing characters. A humorous storyline of a fictitious adventurer and his cohorts permeates every detail of this uniquely decorated venue, and the 'guest experience' includes planned and unplanned opportunities to participate actively with the characters who frequent the club.

The intent

There was nothing like this venue prior to its debut. The concept was first described as a cross between the Magic Castle, an interactive performance venue, and a live show then playing in Los Angeles called *Tamara*. The essential idea, a place where strange things happened in real time with and around the audience, was the driver which dictated every aspect of the facility and its programming. The intent was to draw audiences in by the story, look and feel of the club and then pleasantly surprise them with the interactive elements within it. Although the experience is 'staged' the guest reactions are highly personal. They often return and are extremely interested to engage in conversations about the club and the origins of its inhabitants.

Attention to detail

During the design and construction phases of this project there was a great deal of effort expended by all project members to keep true to this core idea. Over the years, some of the programming has changed, but the design of the space and the manner in which it is operated have remained constant. It can be said that the entire project team's attention to detail — not elaborateness of detail, but attention to story in all aspects of the venue — was one of the keys to its success. Brand-extending venues should be no different. Every brand has a story to tell, so attention to its detail must also play a part in its success. But although conceiving of a great story and being attentive to how the story is told are significant, an understanding of the audience is crucial.

KNOW ONE'S AUDIENCE

A lesson confirmed while developing Universal Studios Japan was that no matter how good or exciting a theme-park attraction is in one location, it still needs to be uniquely appreciated by the audience it is meant to attract in a different location. Attractions that were popular in the USA would not necessarily be understood, accepted and popularised in Japan unless they were specifically designed to do so.

Assure regional appeal

Terminator 2: 3D, Backdraft and Back to the Future are all well-designed attractions that appeal to international tourists. However, to assure regional appeal, they were each reviewed for potential adjustments. In the case of Backdraft, the attraction was based on an older film. However, its fire effects were tremendously exciting. It just needed to communicate better the big idea, which was movie making in action. To do so, the storyline was adjusted to centre on activities that revealed this idea and an immersive environment was created to simulate a technical rehearsal. It conveyed the attraction's revised story effectively while at the same time providing a better build-up to the attraction's flame-filled finale.

Remain true to the storyline

The attraction Terminator 2: 3D clearly conveyed its big idea. It only required a subtle cultural adjustment to the introductory character to succeed completely. Originally designed specifically to irritate American audiences, the Japanese version of this character was created with a personality meant specifically to annoy Japanese audiences. In understanding the purpose of this character's inclusion in the story, the designer was able to modify it effectively. Thus this new character remained true to the essence of the attraction's storyline while reaching out regionally to its target audience.

THE ART OF BRANDING

ESPN Zone

Being able to tell a story, using immersive design tools and understanding an audience were just a few of the important factors to be considered in the design of a project that opened earlier this year. The client was ESPN Zone, a sports-oriented restaurant/entertainment operator. They were building their newest facility in Anaheim, California, next door to the Disneyland theme park within an entertainment centre zone called Downtown Disney. They requested design assistance in communicating the brand's message while also emphasising the local region. So how should their brand's story be told in this location? What could be created artistically that would draw a serious southern Californian sporting audience in close enough to discover an unexpected surprise?

Composing creative elements

Making the most of Ms Taymor's philosophy, the first step was to concentrate on composing creative elements with eye-catching images, shapes and materials meant to reference local popular culture or to encourage a nostalgic reaction. Then layers of

informed commentary were infused into the stories being told to stimulate reactions from the brand's biggest fans. Finally, they were all presented in a storytelling format sure to be unexpected.

Something unexpected

Beyond nirvana for sports fans

The brand was ESPN, a television and radio network that caters primarily to 15–40-year-old men who love sports. For this venue they were given what they wanted: a bar and restaurant for watching sports and an arcade in which to play games. Then they were surprised with something they did not expect: a facility filled with artwork. The target was not exactly an audience which runs to museums, yet they love this stuff, this 'Zone Art'. They are drawn to it — why? Because the artwork is all about sports and, more importantly, it screams ESPN. Whatever the artistic medium, sculpture, painting or assemblage, it contains just the right amount of brand identification.

Bring an enhanced ambience

These highly detailed art pieces feature stories told with ESPN's attitude, their humour, their knowledge of the stats, their pop cultural references, and their adoration for sports — any sport. They love sports! Strange as this may seem, these pieces speak to the ESPN audience and, even better, they have reached out beyond the brand's established market to bring in — women. The artwork subtly brings an enhanced ambience to the venue without discouraging its core market. ESPN is able to retain its male-oriented, commercial appeal while at the same time providing an environment attractive to its fans' dates and their families.

The process

Art and sports

The process of getting it all done began with a heavy dose of research to understand all aspects of the brand and identify the artwork's subject matter. The Los Angeles area has a wealth of sports stories. These include Nolan Ryan's amazing strikeout record and the UCLA basketball team's astounding ten National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships. There are also a great many local kids who have become legendary, from Billie Jean King to Tiger Woods.

Choices

Narrowing down the long list of sports topics and story ideas took time and some negotiation. An *ad hoc* committee was assembled to debate the merits of each prospective concept. It was a passionate and committed group. The 16 Zone Art ideas that were eventually chosen were based on how passionate the committee members were about a particular sport's topic, and how successful the concept was at representing a story worth telling. Once the ideas gained consensus, conceptual sketches were generated and a search began for artists whose styles meshed with the ideas under consideration.

In some cases, the artist's technique directly inspired the ideas; in all cases the choice of medium became as important as the content itself. Since the origination of the artwork was not entirely the artist's creation, the success of the artwork depended entirely upon

the degree of an artist's buy-in with the project. For the client, the process became as important as the artwork itself.

Key issues

From the very beginning it was clear that this was more than just a design exercise; this was an opportunity to make a positive impact on a client's attitude to the creative process. To achieve this, a few key issues had to be addressed.

Client comfort

- That the client was confident that all aspects of who they were and what their brand was about were completely understood.
- That the client could be assured of accuracy of information — crucial to their brand's mantra — and that the important nuances of each topic's story would not be overlooked.
- That the client and the artists who were hired could have an awareness of and develop a comfort with the collaborative aspects of the process.
- That both the client and the artists would feel that this process was an effortless experience, whether or not it really was.

Content delivers the message

Several Zone Art pieces were considered home runs from day one. These included a Tiger Woods collage called *Eyes of the Tiger*, and a group of faux movie posters called *The Lakers' Trilogy*. The artwork frames this professional basketball team's astounding performance over the last 30 years in Los Angeles's favourite storytelling medium — the motion picture. It exemplifies how artwork became the perfect vehicle to amuse and inspire while communicating the essence of this particular brand.

Communicating the essence of the brand

In creating these paintings, every element was carefully considered to reflect stylistically the era of the poster and the sports story it revealed. ESPN's factual knowledge and particular point of view played an important role in the content and unique flavouring of the artwork. Even as the film credits crafted for each poster communicated insider information to the brand's hard-core fans, the details of the posters themselves reached out to those in the audience who were movie lovers, oblivious to the inner meanings implied.

So the attention to process was justified, the artwork was successfully completed and the client was happy with the results. At the end of the day, the artwork is just another building block that contributes to the overall message of the venue. The Zone is a highly commercialised establishment that boldly hawks its wares on the multitude of television monitors that practically support the ceiling of the facility. Perhaps it is this very commercialism, this very loud, in-your-face kind of communication that is its style, its message — its story. However it is defined, this energy permeates everything in the venue, and it creates an intimate connection with its audience to keep them coming back for more.

The message permeates everything

Global appeal

Would a concept like this work for others? Does this approach have global appeal? Absolutely it has this appeal! There are probably other brands in the world market-place that could create equally successful venues if their design and programming were as personalised and as regionally inspired as the ESPN Zone's.

Bottom line, a brand-extending venue is a personal statement to the brand it is attached to, and the place, whatever its format, has to communicate the essence of a particular brand. In a sense, it has to embody its message.

Embody the message

CONCLUSION: DESIGN TO ENTICE AND SURPRISE AN AUDIENCE

In the past, brand-extending venues have run the gamut from beautiful shrines to product showcases. They have displayed, hyped and enhanced places that may be great to look at but may not immediately inspire an audience to make a return visit. This is changing, and the approach of any new corporate design must include new and surprising ways to communicate a client's message and broaden the brand's overall appeal.

It will be through the thoughtful use of immersive design tools, personalised programming and hidden surprises that designers, developers and operators will succeed in creating intimate and lasting connections between the brand and its audience. The possibilities are endless. So, entice the client's audiences, look for ways to tell them something new about the brand, stay true to the details that define it, give them what they do not expect — like artwork — and then let them walk away . . . thrilled!

Create intimate connections

Reference

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