How to deliver experience in a post-Covid world

As we observed in the previous article, the pandemic is shifting the world of experience ever-more towards digital interaction. Here, we want to turn attention to look at the best form hybrid experiences could take. We'll also consider the skills and capabilities needed to deliver in this new world.

To navigate these developments, both agencies and clients must keep from assuming formats we know from live/experiential will find simple links in digital (just because our physical meeting rooms have been replaced by the remote ones of Zoom doesn't mean all channels behave alike). Digital experiences will have to work hard to deliver the electricity of human interaction and we can create this by forging an active community. If we want audiences to take part and engage with our experiences, we need to think a little more like an advertiser to earn their attention and that means more focus on building unique, interaction-rich concepts.

This is both true for brand experience (B2C and B2B) and internal comms (B2E). When we're tasked with remote engagement we'll find that attention is harder won in digital channels. Changes will also force B2B to up its interactive game when it's less dependent on the usual tactics, such as executive events, trade shows and conferences. The typically rational comms of B2B won't cut-through either in a digital environment. Look instead to the creative and interactive ambition of consumer campaigns to create experiences that stand out.

Experiences create digital interaction

Let's take a celebrated example from the world of integrated brand creativity, Lucozade's Conditions Zone. This was a campaign that punched well beyond its media spend as an outsider to the official sponsors of the 2014 World Cup.

Despite hinging on experiential and social media, the aim of the campaign was not simply engagement but to drive brand awareness and grow the category of sporting energy drinks. Usually that's the sort of job assigned to ATL media.

Smart use of social media made it possible to monopolise the early spike in online conversation around the World Cup, specifically around climate and how England would peform in such a humid environment in Brazil.

By creating 'The Conditions Zone', a full indoor five-a-side pitch in London that simulated the microclimate of the Amazon, they used experience to bring something unique to that conversation. They invited players, influencers and journalists to play football in this space, while being monitored for their physical performance, giving them data to be analysed by sports scientists and pundits. It also created influencer content, journalist articles and celebrity films.

By forging an experience, Lucozade created a story around a big event and it was soaked-up by audiences, leading to an estimated £30M of media value across titles like BBC Breakfast and ITV News.

Definition

happening noun

1

Something that happens
: **OCCURRENCE**

2

an event or series of events designed to evoke a spontaneous reaction to sensory, emotional, or spirirual stimuli

3

something(such as an event) that is particularly interesting, entertaining, or important

Why Digital needs experience

Without an established audience for your event, simply staging a digital happening then releasing reportage-style content won't create excitement. And weak outcomes for live participation and digital amplification will follow.

Key to the above example is the creation of value for participants that drives genuine content interactions and shares. This is how experiences make digital and social more effective. At a time when the returns of paid digital media are in question amid concerns over fraudulent ad impressions, brands now have a renewed focus on driving organic traffic for its increased effectiveness. We can see how the eyeballs Lucozade earned from an authentic brand action are worth more to them than the same number delivered by a digital ad platform.

When genuine brand experiences are wired into the Digital lead-generation machine, businesses can directly quantify the sales impact of this kind of activity. Many are seeing their digital spend work much harder because of the quality of engagement it brings to campaigns that are ultimately focused on driving a consumer action. Ebay, for example increased the share of its spend on brand advertising and experiences from 10% to 35% and reported a dramatic improvement in organic traffic ('2020 is the year marketers reinvest in their brands', WARC).

The emergence of more sophisticated hybrid digital experiences will force Event and PR teams into closer collaboration with Digital teams to learn more about this opportunity as we wind out of lockdown.

From experiences to 'happenings'

If 'experience' is condemned to forever conjure the idea of a physical event in the mind of marketers, perhaps we should neutralise the channel implication by recognising the common feature of the best examples as a 'happening'.

Even in the limited audience pool of a B2B event, this sense of 'happening' is crucial if the activity is to reach beyond its immediate participants and have a wider marketing effect. When Dentsu Aegis took 2019's Cannes Lions festival online, they set-up a studio on the Croisette from which they streamed live interviews with some of advertising and media's biggest names. Using native web live platforms like YouTube and LinkedIn to push out the content then helped them win 48% share of voice for the event.

This year, well-established events in the calendar are taking a crash course in the formats of virtual engagement. The Hay Festival, for example, has delivered an online experience of its richly discursive literary event allowing audiences to interact with giants of fiction, art and politics over the web. They've streamed sessions and audiences can address questions to speakers and hooked up with artists and filmmakers to broadcast them at work live from their homes. What's been lost in physical proximity, such as impromptu meetings and conversation, is made up for with the increased internationalisation of the audience that can participate.

This and other events forced to reinvent during the crisis are showing us a glimpse of what is possible if the digital doors are thrown open to a wider group of participants.

How to deliver experience in a post-Covid world

The changes that stick for those of us in the experiential world will be increased attention to creative concept and the value that it brings to those audiences either interacting live or with content triggered by **a 'happening'.**

Future media formats and digital applications will innovate in the ways that digital audiences can engage and that accessibility will let bigger audiences in to events that with previously limited access.

Delivering on this means an increased focus in three areas

Audience

1

Planning ‘community ideas’

This is key to finding a creative concept that not only engages your direct participants but also, if desired has the universal, human appeal to make content move through Social channels, PR and other earned media. Whether this is relevant will hinge on the space you are working in, for example if your experience is B2E then there may not be such a big focus on driving reach. Lucozade, for example, alighted on their concept through Social Listening that revealed the issue of the Brazilian climate driving the majority of online discussion of the World Cup. Wedding this insight to the Brand’s role as a ‘performance enhancer’ helped them find an authentic role to play in online debate.

If we want people to engage with our experiences we need a little tension or jeopardy to get the audience to sit up and pay attention. Then we should look to resolve this with the benefits of our brand proposition.

2

Interactive engagement formats

Once you have the tension or problem that you can solve with your brand. How do you do it? Lucozade’s answer was to stage an experience with limited participants, then amplify its story into digital and PR. They might equally have gathered data from footballers all over the world in differing climates to a digital dashboard where the same brand story could be staged, bypassing an experiential component.

The point is that whether physical, digital or hybrid we need the ‘happening’ from which our story and content will flow. We can mine the heightened innovation the pandemic has triggered in hybrid live digital formats. But ultimately, we must remain focused on the measurable impact that content and PR has on driving business objectives.

Engagement cannot simply be for engagement’s sake, brand experiences will need to prove they can increase effectiveness, especially in the wake of the crisis with tighter budgets and more accountability.

3

Brand content and comms planning

The digital revolution has brought greater accountability with its rich seam of data and analytics. Future projects can be built from measurable businesses objectives with success measured through a mix of traditional experiential metrics and granular digital ones.

For this to succeed we need smart planning in the way we connect pre, during and post-experience content and communications, along with the executional demands of the live ‘happening’ itself. In the content and amplification that flows from an experience, we should always be able to attribute the business goals that inspired a project.

Increasingly, on either client side or agency side, if we’re just doing experience or just doing digital, we’re doing it wrong. The skills and processes from both need to come together in the work that emerges in an increasingly hybrid world.

Working with our clients over the coming months, we’ll be looking for the ways brand content, digital communications and event activity can be brought together in a more coherent way, that drives better results in all areas. Taking on a combination of stock and flow content is essential to excite a community, which might now be the biggest audience you’ve ever faced.