

If a planetarium can do it, so can you: How brands can shift toward an experience-led model

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Abstract

Marketers are increasingly promoting the idea of 'brand as publisher', with resources heavily invested into content creation to compete for visibility among publisher-biased algorithms on social platforms. But instead of appealing to the algorithm, maybe marketers should consider appealing to the consumer — a rising generation that is valuing brands as experiences above all. Drawing on the experience of Adler Planetarium, a leading national museum that operates as an experience-first brand, this paper describes the art of creating engaging experiences both online and off with the support of a collaborative, creative agency partner.

Keywords

experience marketing, experiential brand, museum, advertising, case study, curation, authenticity, nonprofits, brand as publisher

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of a museum sounds rigid and musty, synonymous with artefacts, history and the silent observation of gallery walls. Increasingly, however, the very idea of a museum is inspiring the shift to a more experience-conscious brand thanks to an evolving wave of new technology and the frenetic adoption of social platforms. Adler Planetarium might be an unlikely

source of the most cutting-edge marketing innovation — it has a nonprofit budget, abstract subject matter (although it is freaking awesome), and a very small team — but ultimately it is these constraints that breed the scrappiness, creativity and speed required of successful brands today.

This paper will present observations of the 'brand as experience' model from a museum point of view, with case

studies from Adler Planetarium as well as other experience-led brands. It will show that an ownable marketing campaign is still crucial for results, and that new technology and channels alone are not automatic wins without creativity and authenticity.

THE RISE (AND FALL) OF BRAND AS PUBLISHER

Before talking about ‘brand as experience’, it might help to start with the trending refrain of ‘brand as publisher’ promoted by many marketers today. This is the idea that the always-on culture and publisher-friendly algorithms of social media have demanded that brands become content machines, churning out listicles, infographics, real-time video feeds, influencer partnerships, content calendars and other exhaustive means to create shareable brand content.

According to a report on the publisher movement by digital agency Huge:

‘The shifting structure of search algorithms is beginning to reward good and plentiful content. Search engines now measure social signals as well to determine search rankings, making citations (not just links), virality, and page authority increasingly important. The more and better content, the better search results.’¹

While there is a valid need to compete for visibility with good content, it is an overwhelming, unsustainable ask for a marketing division built for sales (or an equivalent metric) to evolve suddenly into a publishing house built for engagement. For the majority of marketers, the investment required for new technology, staff, content strategy and always-on newsrooms is unrealistic, although a couple solutions have

emerged: becoming better curators of other people’s content, or hiring a publisher/social media agency to do the work for you. Even then comes the muddy conversation with the brand’s agency about return on investment (ROI) — building both creative and technical solutions that help connect engagement — however that is defined by the agency or social platform — to conversion.

This overwhelming rush to publish has led to more noise; over five exabytes of content are created every day.² Brands start to lose sight of their point of view, and the opportunity for two-way engagement with the consumer turns into an echo chamber of a brand talking about itself, with itself — and shouting it, with the boost of paid media. While Oreo is a much-lauded case study of real-time success thanks to its ‘Dunk in the dark’ Super Bowl tweet, a look at the feed today shows mini ad after ad, and hashtags force-fitting new Oreo product names.³ Is this really what marketing success looks like today?

SPACE IS FREAKING AWESOME

Adler perhaps has the luxury of a mission: to inspire exploration and understanding of the universe. The brand does not lose its point of view because it simply cannot afford to; it is led by a mission rather than a profit goal. The museum is under less pressure to talk about itself than important conversation around science and astronomy, to further education about space, and support a passion for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Having this kind of focus has led to Adler’s most successful ad campaign to date: ‘Space Is Freaking Awesome’. The opportunity was obvious in retrospect;



Figure 1: Adler Planetarium's 'Space Is Freaking Awesome' campaign

other Chicago attractions had tangible, shiny exhibits like dinosaurs, Picassos and beluga whales, while Adler had the obscure job of defining a planetarium. What the brand needed to remind itself, and the public, was that it had the most exciting and literally ever-expanding topic of all: space.

Adler immersed its agency in the full experience, introduced them to its astronomers, walked them through the exhibits and explained the technology in its Space Visualization Lab, which is open to the public to encourage hands-on play and conversation with the astronomers. Agency partners were invited to the Adler After Dark events, which attract a millennial crowd to wander Adler Planetarium on a weeknight with drinks in hand, and indulge in a fun (and often kind of nerdy) pop-culture theme. Adler explained its community outreach efforts, like 'Scopes in the City', bringing free telescope observing

programmes into Chicago neighbourhoods, and 'Ask An Astronomer', where staff would ride public transportation with signs encouraging commuters to ask them about space and science.

It became clear that Adler was driven by other peoples' curiosity about space, as that curiosity was in its DNA, too. The target demographic became defined by a mindset rather than an age group — Adler simply wanted the curious. And it wanted that curiosity, energy and enthusiasm to be contagious. Adler therefore went big and bold with a playful new look and a new tagline: 'Space Is Freaking Awesome'. Through digital adverts, social, billboards, print, radio and television, the campaign came to life through a series of mind-blowing facts about space, vetted by Adler's own astronomers (see Figure 1). Rather than talking only about Adler Planetarium and showing predictable imagery of

families pointing at Adler's meteorite (which is, indeed, touchable), Adler shifted the conversation to the awesomeness of space — something so much bigger than Adler Planetarium's walls, but a curiosity that could only be satisfied by the unique experience offered by Adler.

Since launching in June 2015, there has already been a major impact on visitation (high on the list of important metrics). Despite accounting for only 7 per cent of the category spend, 2015 attendance went up 22 per cent from the previous year — growth that was 275 per cent higher than the average of Chicago's top 11 museums. Adler has surpassed 500,000 visitors for the first time since 1993, blowing away that record with a final tally of over 550,000.

The effort lifted the brand beyond anyone's expectations; staff wear Space Is Freaking Awesome shirts while they are on visitor floors, and receive requests from the public to sell the shirts in the store. Due to popular demand, partnerships have been created with cinemas to give talks about the science behind the science fiction of 'The Martian' or 'Star Wars'. Adler has organised the 'Galaxy Ride', a free, 300-mile bike ride led by one of its astronomers to tour science and space-themed local schools, libraries and astronomy clubs.

Adler is creating more opportunities to make the science of space more accessible beyond visitor hours, and therefore has found ways to extend the brand as an experience in constant iteration — living and growing with the speed of curiosity.

Experience = brand

You may be thinking, 'that's nice and all, but how does this apply to my

brand?' Adler believes that all brands can and should be experience-led. The digital landscape demands experiential thinking — a more genuine, multifaceted, living and breathing approach to how a consumer needs to engage with a brand today. There are many ways to define an experiential brand, but more commonly it involves enabling consumers to 'feel' a brand, not simply be exposed to it.⁴

Some go as far as to call it 'experience innovation', with the intent of inventing new experiences with enough emotional value that customers turn into loyal brand advocates. This is an approach that goes beyond ideas or products to become an ecosystem of connected moments.⁵ For example, Walt Disney World created the MagicBand, a connected wristband for families to optimise their waiting time in the parks, while creating new touch points, like curated apps that add magic to the experience for children.⁶

Many credit the millennial generation with fuelling the growth of the experience economy, where a focus on creating, sharing and capturing memories through events has driven up experiential appetite. Indeed, nearly seven in ten millennials experience fear of missing out.⁷

Internally, the experiential shift may be bred from an aversion to the silos created by marketers. Consumers do not see brands in the organisational fragments marketers have designed for themselves — the brand as digital, the brand as in-store, the brand as mobile. Rather, the shift should be from 'omni-channel' to 'blended', or the only channel.⁸ Using more consumer empathy, it is finally possible to see the brand as a blended feeling and experience that allows for organic discovery, and begin to shift our approach accordingly.

To better illustrate, this paper takes real-world successes from Adler's own process and inspiration from outside the museum industry, and translates them into four key themes that can thrive in an experiential world.

Play

First, is the idea of play. At Adler, play is crucial to making space and science more tangible and accessible. Adler's Community Design Lab (CDL) is a public workshop for visitors to build and experiment with different materials and design solutions, like photographing objects in space, or seeing what would survive a high-altitude balloon more than 30,000 metres above the surface of the Earth. Like almost everything that is interactive at Adler, the CDL is one slice of many opportunities to feel what it is like to be a space scientist, and experience the curiosity that drives Adler's own staff of astronomers.

According to American Express, 'Experiential marketing is about getting people to feel what it is like to be a member of American Express'.⁹ As a leading sponsor of the US Open tennis championship, AmEx has created an over 6,000-square-metre fan experience space for attendees to perfect their game and challenge friends to virtual matches.¹⁰ Similarly, Target created a pop-up shop, Target Wonderland, in New York City to help customers feel like kids again.¹¹ The hybrid toy store/playground featured larger-than-life toys such as a jumbo Etch-A-Sketch, and RFID-enabled items that could be quickly scanned and added to wish lists.

Experiential efforts do not have to be massive budget and time-intensive builds to encourage play, but can take shape in the form of 'surprise and delight'. MasterCard launched 'Priceless Surprises', handing out spontaneous gifted experiences to its social

followers, such as concert tickets and celebrity meet-and-greets.¹² 'Surprise and delight' is synonymous with 'feel good' marketing; incentivising play can be just as powerful as the experience itself.

With experiential brands built on the power of feeling, there is arguably nothing more powerful than that of nostalgia. Adler has tapped into that feeling with the 'Adler After Dark' events, many themed off nostalgic science-related pop-culture, like the 'Back to the Future' night. With nostalgia comes a return to youth, and therefore a licence to play. 'Space Is Freaking Awesome' is strategically playful in tone, to encourage the youthful excitement that comes with discovering something new and mind-blowing about the universe.

The idea of play is more than just a marketing exercise; it is part of what Adler does naturally to build experiences at Adler Planetarium. Adler's biggest inspiration does not necessarily come from other planetariums or museums, but from the magic of theme parks and cruise ships (Disney), experiential retail (Nike, American Girl), or creative office spaces (Google). These brands are either built to encourage children's capacity to imagine and play, or help adults return to that uninhibited world. With this inspiration, Adler staff build exhibit prototypes and play with them themselves, before testing them with small batches of visitors on the floor. This leads to the concept of 'always in beta'.

Beta

Digital data and the immediacy of consumer feedback have helped marketers adopt an 'always in beta' approach: create and iterate, learn and evolve. Mobile games and apps have

normalised this for today's consumer, with new version releases each week, not every two years. This willingness to experiment, take risks, and grow at a faster pace is central to an experience-led brand, because it is consumer-conscious; quicker feedback is crucial as attention spans shrink.

Adler has found its own version of new app releases: temporary exhibits. While not a new concept to museums, temporary exhibits for any experiential brand are opportunities to release something fresh and timely to draw in traffic, and give people a reason to return. For example, Adler recently launched its 'What Is a Planet?' temporary exhibit to address the public's ongoing confusion over Pluto being demoted from planet status.

Sometimes, these temporaries outperform expectations and turn into permanent exhibits (like the Community Design Lab). Others will rotate out to make room for newly relevant content, which is important due to Adler Planetarium's smaller space and the overflow of stories Adler wants to tell. These limitations, whether they be floor space or resources, have forced Adler to truly be flexible and adaptable. Staff are always curious and never truly finished with anything.

Curation/story making

The work of any museum is by definition a curated experience. Given new digital context, the role of curator has been thrust upon all brands as an additional responsibility to stay afloat of what Fast Company describes as 'the firehose of content that is the internet'.¹³ Adler is faced with a public that can readily access space facts and news without having to pay for admission to Adler Planetarium; still, the digital deluge of information does not diminish its role, but rather amplifies the

need to sift through the noise and curate a better experience for the curious. According to Bob Pittman, chairman and chief executive of iHeartMedia, 'The grand expert is diminished and the curator is heightened in terms of importance'.¹⁴

Adler's Curator of Experience and the Director of Experiential Learning talk with Adler's astronomers to get a feel for the subtleties of content, identifying what excites them most. What is important is not so much the words as the tone. For example, for the creation of the Pluto Discovery installation, an astronomer talked through what it must have been like to click monotonously through image after image, slowly going insane, and suddenly having that moment of discovery. It was immediately clear that that was the story to tell. When you know so much of the information, the story can become hidden from you, and it is the curator's job to find it.

For brands, the role of curator also translates as the role of storyteller; in the newer world of transmedia marketing, consumers experience a brand through collaboration and story. According to author and transmedia architect Dr Chester Elijah Branch, 'the brand is no longer the storyteller but a facilitator in the story making'.¹⁵ Dr Branch refers to this movement as 'prosumerism', where there is a shift to consumers participating in a brand rather than simply consuming it.

Transmedia marketing has roots in the entertainment industry, where the 'always on' digital environment has instigated a wider experiential approach to storytelling for motion pictures, television and games. 'The Matrix' extended its storyline beyond the movie itself, designed to be experienced across graphic novels and a video game. Similarly, Steven Spielberg's film 'AI:

Artificial Intelligence' led a trail for people to uncover an 'Anti-Robot Militia' website, with ongoing clues to be unlocked, and even a real-world rally in New York.¹⁶

Purpose

The story Adler is building and curating is an authentic one; it all goes back to Adler's mission of inspiring exploration and understanding of the universe. Adler hosts lectures with accessible, low-priced admission fees despite knowing these cannot cover the speaker costs. Adler's astronomers could have chosen to research at a university, but instead found their calling in interacting with the public, whether it is answering questions among exhibits or hosting a science-themed bike ride across state borders. Everyone at Adler is driven by their internal sense of purpose.

The transparency of brands being on social media and being vulnerable to having to act, well, human, has amped up the need for authenticity in marketing. It is now more important than ever to have a purpose and show it in action, to make the consumer experience it and feel it.

American Express knew the economic downturn in 2010 would hit small businesses hard. The launch of Small Business Saturday was its way of investing campaign dollars into creating a post-Thanksgiving holiday shopping event that celebrated shopping local.¹⁷ AmEx provided downloadable in-store display kits for small business owners to use, and partnered with Facebook to offer advertising space to existing account holders, as well. The effort has garnered huge national support and continues to gain momentum each year. It is a great example of a brand showing by doing; small business owners and shoppers alike had a chance to

experience the powerful reach and support of having AmEx on their side.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

Adler is driven by the visitor experience; it cares about seeing a new generation get excited about STEM, space, and everything in between. The approach is ultimately a human one. There are no silos of digital or non-digital strategies, or a checklist of media buys that can guarantee success, or content calendars that need to align with marketing window promotions. The container of the marketing message will continue to change with the speed of innovation. Marketers must be more thoughtful about building experiences that encourage the opportunity to explore, to feel, to learn and to participate — not simply to buy. Today, marketers can build an experiential journey that takes less expected routes to arrive at conversion, whether that is taking your American Girl doll to the Doll Hair Salon or dressing up for Planetary Prom to learn more about the solar system. Try to play, iterate, and curate with a purpose; thinking like a museum will give you the freedom to think of your brand as an experience.

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