

The X-Factors to Experiential Marketing Success

An Introduction

In today's economy, it is critical to optimize marketing dollars to get the best ROI possible. You need to be able to identify your audience, make a connection with them and close business.

One of the fastest and most effective ways to make that connection is through an immersive brand experience. Event, exhibit and mobile experiences can effectively engage your target audience with your brand, your product or service and your company. It is the best way to develop a real face-to-face connection with them, generate a working relationship and ultimately close deals.

Experiential events, exhibits and mobile tours can be highly effective marketing tools. Yet as a medium of expression, there are a number of obstacles that can reduce your chances of success and/or drive costs through the roof. To be successful, you have to constantly look at balancing strategic needs and relevant costs. Creating an event or exhibit experience that is effective from these two perspectives requires focused attention to a number of elements during the design phase. I refer to these as the "X-Factors" — those elements which ultimately define the difference between success and failure.

Effectively assessing, addressing and integrating each of these X-Factors into the design process, allows you to deliver an experience which will engage, educate and connect with your audience and enable you to meet your objectives — both strategically and financially.

The "X-Factors to Experiential Marketing Success" Forum is a series of white papers and community blogs. The purpose of this Forum is to give you a stronger contextual background for designing and delivering cost effective, successful experiential marketing programs. It will provide you with insights from myself and others gained through years of collective experience. And hopefully, it will enhance your ability to design, develop and deliver experiential marketing programs that meet your objectives. After all, that's what it's all about — getting results.

This is the first installment in the "*X-Factors to Experiential Marketing Success*" Forum. It provides an introduction to each of the X-Factors and their significance. It gives you a roadmap for the program. This year, we will focus on discussing one of these X-Factors each month. We will kick-off each discussion with a unique White Paper — discussing the significance of the particular X-Factor and how to successfully address it during the design process. Within the EXP bog, we will also provide links to examples of success and pose provocative questions to open discussions.

X-Factor 1: Qualify Your Audience

Appropriately qualifying with your audience is the primary X-Factor that will determine the success or failure of any experiential marketing program. If you don't have the right audience, you won't be successful, regardless how great of an experience you create! Plain and simple, budget doesn't matter. What does matter is how effectively you spend it. You can spend a little or a lot of money talking to the wrong people and get a bad ROI. Yet, when designing an effective experiential marketing program, this is one of the most overlooked elements.

To me, understanding your target audience is the fundamental foundation of designing any successful event or exhibit. First, it forces you define who you really want to reach and why. Second, it gets you focused on getting the right people to the right place — your event and / or exhibit. And finally, it allows you to effectively align all elements of the experience with that audience — who they are and how they think. This dramatically increases your chances of success. And it dramatically increases your ROI.

It all starts with defining a clear profile of *who* you want to reach through the event or exhibit experience. If you don't really know who you want to reach, you will not be able to truly tailor the experience to them. Once you know who you want to reach, the question becomes *how* do you connect with them? This next step requires that you understand as much as you possibly can about who they are and what makes them tick.

What is their age? Where do they live? What do they do with their free time? What decisions do they typically make? Who influences those decisions? How do they ultimately make their decision? And so on. These audience factoids break down into two categories — **demographics** and **psychographics**.

You start by specifying the relevant **demographics**. These are the cut and dried facts, figures and statistics about the potential targets of your efforts. These are the statistics that are attributed to each of us as individuals — age, race, income range, marital status, family size, where they work, where they live, etc.

Next you focus on what makes them “tick”. This is about understanding their **psychographics**. These are the intangible, less concrete facts that reflect lifestyle patterns and behaviors. Things like how they shop, political and religious beliefs, and key influencers in their life. Psychographics allow you to further narrow your focus and better understand where, when, and most importantly, *how* to best connect with your audience.

Key Concept — *Qualifying your audience is the foundation for creating a GREAT experiential marketing program. The combination of demographics and psychographics defines your target audience. Who they are. How they think. How they are influenced. And ultimately, how they approach making their purchase decisions. As you design and develop your experience, every decision that you make should take this profile into account. This is the foundation to help you reach or exceed the ROI you are trying to achieve.*

X-Factor 2: Set Measurable Objectives & Parameters

While knowing your target audience is the foundation for success, equally important, is knowing *what* you want to accomplish with this audience. This entails setting measurable objectives *prior* to beginning the design process. How will success be measured? Is it about changing perception about management, your brand or a product? Is it about increasing brand or product awareness? Is it about attendance or sampling numbers? Is it about increasing sales numbers or ROI? Objectives vary significantly, based upon your target audience. And they can be both **quantitative** and **qualitative**.

Quantitative objectives are easily measurable. They represent the degree of success you hoped to achieve based upon a numerical target set prior to the experience versus the numerical results achieved by the end of the program. These include items like the number of attendees with a certain demographic or job title, the number of product demos or samples distributed, the number of sales calls scheduled, the number of sales booked, the incremental value of each sale, etc.

Qualitative objectives, on the other hand, involve a change of opinion, a mind shift. They are less concrete. They are best measured through pre-experience and post-experience surveys. These include items such as a shift in perception of management, a brand or a product, an increase in brand or product awareness, or increase in intent to purchase, etc.

The experiences that are most successful over the long-term, take both quantitative and qualitative objectives into consideration. This is especially true for repetitive programs, where change can be monitored over multiple cycles of the program. When setting measurable objectives, look at both quantitative and qualitative measurements. Get upper management involved in defining the appropriate things to measure and setting the targets for success. Get their buy-in *prior* to the start of project design. Also ensure that you have their agreement on measurement and reporting tools to assess the program's success upon completion.

As you are defining objectives, it is important to set clear program parameters for audience size, timing, locations, budget, etc. These work hand-in-hand with objectives. You need to ensure that it is realistic to accomplish the objectives being set within the parameters you have for the program. Balancing realistic parameters with objectives can be an iterative process. Just set realistic expectations with management.

Key Concept — *Setting measurable objectives & parameters, along with knowing your audience, provides a strong foundation for good design. Objectives & parameters are most valuable if they are properly set, accurately measured and reported in a timely manner to those who ultimately approve and fund marketing program expenditures. Well-defined objectives & parameters provide you and your management with a long-term yardstick for measuring success — both strategically and financially.*

X-Factor 3: Balance Budget and Approach

Once you've defined your audience and established your objectives, the next step is to define the budget and the best approach to accomplish your objectives. Start this process by looking at four key parameters that significantly impact budget. First, look at "Audience Push or Pull". How motivated are they to come to you? Or do you need to go to where they already are located? Second, determine whether you are going to be an "owner", creating your own event or a "participant", becoming part of a larger industry event or tradeshow. This decision is based upon the push / pull reality of your audience. Third, decide if you are going to create your own event or mobile tour or if you want to be a participant in a larger program. And finally, determine if you need one or many locations.

These four key parameters should be based upon what you need to accomplish from a numbers perspective — awareness, demos, interactions and sales objectives. And together these four parameters define which approach gives you the best chance of achieving them. If your audience is motivated to find you, you may choose to create your own, single experiential event or tradeshow. If you can't easily draw your target audience, you may choose to go to them with your own mobile tour or be a participant in a larger event or tradeshow where you will be able to reach them.

Select the best approach and develop a top-line fiscal model. Define as many of the program parameters as possible: the required audience numbers, the length and agenda for a program or scale of the exhibit to accomplish your objectives. Detail everything you can logically can then build a straw man fiscal model. Allocate "buckets of money" to account for everything, including at least a 10% contingency.

If the approach that best meets your objectives does not fit your budget, you have 3 options. Modify the budget to deliver on the approach. Modify the approach to what you can afford. Or modify your objectives to achieve what you can afford. Make sure you can truly afford to do what you want to do. Or only do what you can truly afford. It's all about balance.

Key Concept — *Balancing budget and approach provides you with the architectural foundation for success.. Assess the key budgetary parameters upfront, define the right approach, then develop a fiscal model. The more comprehensive you can make the fiscal model you develop, the more likely you will be successful from a fiscal management perspective. In the end, the ultimate success of your program will be judged by your ability to meet your objectives within your specified budget.*

X-Factor 4: Focus Your Message

So, you know your audience, you've set measurable objectives and defined the approach you are taking to reach them. Now you have to figure out what you want to say to them. What your message will be to them. This seems simple. But this is actually where a lot of programs fail. This is one of the hardest things to do, many times due to the number of people involved and their differing priorities for the program.

It is critical to streamline and focus your message. An audience will not remember 20, 10 or even 5 messages. Once they leave, they will remember one. So **define** the most important thing that you want them to remember, the one thing that will help you meet your objectives. As you define this message, be realistic. Ask yourself the hardest question — will your audience really care? Assuming they will, ensure that you express it in a way that is relevant to them.

Once you **define** the message, it is critical to consistently **align** all content with that message, whether it is a five-minute live demo on a mobile tour, multiple interactive demos in a museum space or five days of session content at a Conference. Your central message should act as the foundation for telling a compelling story — your story, in a concise, cohesive and effective manner. Everything should connect back to one single take-away message. If this is truly the right message, it should become the hang point for the theme and the design of your experience.

Key Concept- *Focusing your message optimizes your opportunity. How well you **define** and **align** your message with your audience and with what they want to hear, will determine whether they engage and act upon it. A well-defined message will help you maximize your ROI. Keep it simple. Connect. And Close.*

X-Factor 5: Develop a Compelling Theme

From an experiential perspective, defining a focused and aligned message provides the framework for delivering all content and telling a cohesive story. A well-crafted **theme**, takes that story and brings it to life. And in a similar fashion, it becomes the single creative hang-point for developing all creative components of the experience.

A great theme is the creative expression of the message in a unique and memorable way. It provides a relevant metaphor for telling your story with the appropriate tone and feeling — one that connects with your audience. One that is compelling. Your audience can easily relate to it. It connects!

A great theme not only connects with your audience, but also provides great financial leverage. It helps you optimize your budget, while maximizing the experience. It is easily interpreted across all elements of the experience, providing consistency and reinforcing your message. It helps in selecting the right location and venue. It provides a starting point for developing experiential staging and message interpretation through graphics, the web, print, video and talent. It allows you to leverage elements such as logos, graphics across multiple mediums — effectively and efficiently.

When defining your theme, it is also important that you **define** and **align** it with your existing Corporate Marketing Communications Platform and Corporate Branding. In this way, it further reinforces existing brand recognition programs and simplifies the process of management buy-in to the concept. If you appropriately **define** and **align** your message and subsequently your theme, you will greatly increase the chances of not only buy-in from your target audience, but also buy-in within your corporation.

Key Concept - *Developing a compelling theme allows you to creatively package your message — effectively and consistently. It captures your target audience's attention. It engages them from the start to finish of your program. It becomes the face of the experience. And ultimately increases your chance of success — strategically and financially.*

X-Factor 6: Select a Great Location

Selecting a **great venue** provides the contextual backdrop for your experience. Is it stand-alone or part of a bigger conference, tradeshow or event?

If you are part of a bigger show, which one is most appropriate? Which one will give you most cost-effective access to your target audience? Which one will give you the best ROI?

If it is stand-alone event experience, is it single city or multi-city? What city or cities are most appropriate? Where will you maximize audience reach? What venue will work best? Does it need to be a casual, family location? Or does it need to be upscale and business-like?

In all of these cases, you should go back to the program audience and objectives, ultimately considering how well the venue matches your target audience. Will you get the numbers you want? And finally, and most importantly, is a location where your audience will be predisposed to listening to your message?

Your initial considerations include ease-of-access, capacity, availability and cost. But then you should also look at the venue in terms of how well it aligns with the experience you are trying to create. The overall concept — the theme, the tone, the look and feel will come through much stronger if the venue aligns with it. And it will be more cost effective to stage. The more it aligns with the experience that you want to create, the less expenditure you need to put into staging the environment — saving dollars and most likely creating a more effective experience.

Key Concept - *Selecting a great location can implicitly set you up for success. It delivers the first impression to your target audience. It sets the tone for the overall experience. And it provides a contextual backdrop to everything you want them to hear. So select a venue that aligns with the experience you want to create, where you will get maximum audience exposure and a venue where your audience will actually listen to what you have to say.*

X-Factor 7: Create the Right Environment

Selecting the **right venue** is the first step in creating the **right environment**. Once you have the venue, the next question is how do you best **stage** it? Should it be simplistic and business-like? Or should it be theatrical? Should it reflect the corporate look? Or does it need to reflect a unique spirit of the product or audience? How does it blend with the location or locations selected? Since staging goes hand-in-hand with location, selecting a great location can have a major impact on your success in integrating the theme, as well as the ultimate budget you spend on staging your experience.

As you stage an event or conference experience, blend the theme into the venue, using unique structural elements and shapes. Bring your stage into the audience, using techniques such as thrust and satellite stages, chevron seating, moving lights and surround audio.

For exhibits, create the experience to be inwardly focused within the exhibit footprint, minimizing distractions. Use structural elements, theatrical draws, lighting and staffing to accomplish this. Create a unique immersive space. Create a space that draws in attendees and maintains their attention.

For mobile environments, use vehicles that play to what you are trying to accomplish. Semis, mid-size trucks, pop-ups, SUVs, small attract sets or “events-in-a-box” can all work as long as the approach that you ultimately select, aligns with your budget and the experience that you are trying to create. When designing a mobile environment, ensure that it brings your theme to life, creates audience intrigue and is operationally efficient.

Key Concept - *Creating the right environment all starts with “Selecting A Great Location”. The right combination of location and staging should allow you to “own the audience” by engulfing them in the theme and branding for the event, exhibit or mobile experience. Keep it simple, align it with the theme and where possible, leverage the environment. It will ultimately provide you with the best context for your experience and for your budget.*

X-Factor 8: Bring Your Message to Life

Once you know the story you want to tell and decide a theme, you need to establish how the story is told. What is the right mix of speakers, theatrical talent, video, music, etc? It's all about interpretation. Interpretation that is creative, yet relevant to the audience, message and environment — that's **production value**.

Production value brings the message to the senses through thematic expression. An appropriate mix of staging combined with delivery mediums such as media, music and talent brings your theme and your message to life.

Always follow three rules when defining production value. First, select techniques that align with your audience demographics and psychographics. You want to optimize their interest in your message. Ensure that you are doing things that align with who they are and how they think. Second, ensure that the techniques you choose will truly engage and involve your audience, while reinforcing the theme, the message and relevant content. And finally, as with the message and theme, it's all about simplicity. Leverage the look and feel across all aspects of the experience. This creates consistency, focus and cost efficiency. The combination of the appropriate **theme, environment AND production value** opens your audience to embrace your message. It is this artful combination of these three components that brings an experience to life.

Key Concept - *Creatively expressing your message requires out-of-the-box thinking, brainstorming and fresh ideas. One cautionary point is to not overdo it. Find a creative hook that works for your message and will appeal to your audience. Then, keep it simple, relevant, yet compelling. With great creative expression, it's all about effective implementation — less is more. From a strategic and a budgetary perspective.*

X-Factor 9: Infuse Audience Interactivity

The preceding X-Factors define how to create an experience that not only delivers a focused message and content, but one that is packaged in a way to catch your audience's attention and appeal to their senses. As you create the detailed content, the goal is to involve your audience — **infuse audience interactivity**. The greater the audience involvement throughout the course of the experience, the greater the lasting impact it will have.

Regardless of the type of experience that you are creating, there are multiple ways to involve, and ultimately engage, your audience. For events and conferences, interweave interactivity using things as simple as interactive sessions, panels or Q&A. You can spice up any session with automated response systems to drive home key points and survey your audience for opinions. Interactive demos, games, competitions and talent, are not only good to liven up an event or conference, but are critical for the success of experiential exhibits and mobile programs. The key thing to remember is that once you attract that audience, your goal is to engage them and hook them into your message. Getting them interactively involved keeps them focused and deepens their connection.

Key Concept - *Infusing audience interactivity can dramatically change the tone and audience experience. The key is to thread interactive techniques throughout the design of your experience, whether it is a permanent exhibit, 5-day Conference or a 5-minute mobile demo. Through interactivity, you will be able to make a real and relevant connection with your audience — one that begins a relationship with them.*

X-Factor 10: Close the Deal!

As we wrap-up this installment, I want to come back to one final X-Factor — Close the Deal. Once you've built the perfect experience to promote your brand, product or service, you need to ensure that you achieve your objectives from an audience perspective. You need to "Close the Deal"! That may involve creating brand or product awareness, changing brand or product perception, or most likely driving additional sales.

X-Factor 9, Infusing Interactivity, is the key enabler to "Closing the Deal". It's about interacting with your audience. Learn where they are in the purchase cycle. Do they know your brand? Do they know your product? Are they considering purchase? Or are they ready to purchase? This is your opportunity to "move the needle" and drive them to purchase. Interactivity allows you to read the mindset of each prospect and move them towards the close. The two X-Factors work hand-in-hand.

Key Concept - *Closing the deal is not representative of the end of the experience, but rather the beginning of the relationship. At this point, you want to provide a compelling reason to communicate with them after the experience is over. For B-to-C programs, it could be in-store or web-based incentives to drive purchase. For B-to-B programs, it could be follow-up sales meetings. Whatever experience you create, build in a follow-on opportunity to “Close the Deal”.*

Wrapping Up

When designing an experience, all of these X-Factors should be considered. The relevant importance of each, varies from program to program, but each should be assessed during the design process and monitored during implementation and delivery to ensure your success from both a strategic and financial perspective.

This initial installment of the “X-Factor” white paper series provides an overview of the critical X-Factors to successfully design and develop an experiential marketing program. As you can surmise, there is much more depth behind each of them. Over the coming weeks, we will explore each of these X-Factors in much greater detail. The next report: “X-Factor 1: Qualify Your Audience” will be available the week of April 5th. You have free access to it simply by logging in on the blog page. In the meantime, check-out my blog at jsanteler@exp.tv to discuss the X-Factors in more detail.

Thanks!

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