

Deciphering experiential

So everyone's quite clear on what experiential marketing is, right? If that's true, why does Google report 1.2 million hits seeking definitions of the methodology. **Sophia Russell** investigates.

Delving into the elusive area of experiential marketing is like analysing a conspiracy theory – everyone talks about it, but look for any traces in the records and it just isn't there.

Nielsen Media Research is yet to quantify experiential marketing spend due to the difficulties involved in tracking peripheral media activity, although managing director Peter Cornelius believes the phenomenon is rapidly growing.

For consumers who attend Malibu's Sunset Socials – which take place in different beachfront locations across Australia – the experience is most certainly genuine. It means interacting with a brand that is allowing them to see the hottest DJs in the land.

It also means attractive 20-somethings downing drinks with teasing smiles, good vibes, great times and a party that stretches all night long. But how much are campaigns like this gaining traction and what is behind the swell of interest in this marketing discipline?

Maverick Marketing and Communications, the agency behind the Malibu work, sees on average 10-30% of client budgets invested in experiential campaigns, while product sampling agency Promotional Sampling has increased its business revenues more than two-fold over the past two years – driven by the company's experiential arm, 5iveSenses.

According to Bruce Robinson, director of Promotional Sampling, experiential executions can provide a longer "hang time" with consumers, whether it be at a music festival or the streets of the CBD.

But are elaborate sampling campaigns all there is to experiential marketing? And do the close ties with promotional agencies jar with the brand-building nature of experiential? Agencies agree that the discipline resembles an evolving beast, rather than an easily definable marketing tool.

John du Vernet, head of special projects at Naked, prefers to see experiential marketing not as a channel, but a style of communication that can live across multiple channels.

"A lot of people think that putting

brands in hands is experiential – I don't think so," says du Vernet. "The idea should be able to live across all layers of communication."

Naked's Cannes Bronze Lion award-winning campaign for streetwear brand Golf Punk is an example of this. Built on the concept of marketers trying to brainwash customers, the campaign rotated around the bogus "Hypnomarketing" technique, which claimed to hypnotise consumers into being brand advocates for the clothing brand.

What made the tongue-in-cheek stunt experiential rather than just a street-type execution was the concept's reach across different media channels. The \$100,000 campaign gained PR momentum across programs and channels such as *Today Tonight*, 2UE, blogs and street media, delivering good return-on-investment for the Golf Punk brand.

Its low budget is not unusual for experiential executions. Todd Marks, managing director of Maverick, says a \$1.5 m price-tag for running a TVC on free-to-air over one week equals the entire budget for a large-scale experiential campaign. And despite the common complaint that it is near impossible to measure experiential results, agencies like Naked and Maverick have found bespoke ways to track the depth, value and frequency of engagements within their campaigns. On the whole, Australia still

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lags behind the UK and the US in the experiential marketing field though, where experience-led campaigns are far more common and well developed. Some in the industry believe a lot of people are locally dabbling in the discipline, but few can claim to genuinely understand the concept behind it.

"We have advertising agencies doing scam ads to try and show they do experiential, PR agencies trying to do events, promotional staffing agencies trying to show they do 'ideas'," says Marks.



Devised by Maverick Marketing and Communications, Malibu's Sunset Socials link the fruit-flavoured rum drink with the hottest

Stephen Van Elst, who recently moved from Belong to the Australian Business Theatre (ABT), as creative director of brand experience, says the industry is struggling to create "clarity" for the client in this hazy area of marketing communications. "Many people just use it as a hook to engage a client, then switch back to traditional advertising," he says.

The biggest temptation for advertisers is to treat experiential campaigns as a tack-on idea following a successful TVC. It's common to see entertainment zones

incorporating experiential with an overall strategy and seeing results.

Unilever's provocative LynxJet campaign and Telstra Big Pond's *Australian Idol* interaction are two examples, as is Nivea's Young Dolly Club, an online space that was created with teen magazine *Dolly* and saw 4000 subscriptions at launch. But it's not just something for established powerhouse brands to apportion funds to.

Marks says that at Maverick, companies that put huge chunks of their budgets into experiential generally need to break into highly competitive markets, such as Virgin Mobile's entry into the crowded telecommunications sector. The mobile phone company launched in Australia seven years ago by placing double-beds on the streets of Sydney, inviting people to "hop into bed" with Virgin.

According to Rich Field, marketing manager at Virgin Mobile, the company used the feedback to develop its first range of products.

"The only way to understand consumers is to interact with them. This shapes what we do and how we conduct our business," says Field.

Virgin Mobile recently launched the V Festival – a large-scale music event constructed for youth audiences that has already done wonders for the brand in the UK. An event of this kind may push the

that brandish TVC slogans in shopping centres or stage a one-off gimmick in the middle of a crowded festival.

Like matching suitcases – or as du Vernet says he prefers, Louis Vuitton luggage – this approach means each component of the campaign looks the same, rather than bringing a central idea to life. "It does great injustice to our area of marketing to see this happening," adds Marks. "People haven't thought about return on investment".

But it's not all bad news for the industry. There are Australian brands