

Brand Therapy: Ways to Stay Ahead

As consumers pull back, the future belongs to those who support wellness, experience and convenience



by JANET GROEBER

Whether it's uncertainty over elections, worries about the economy or the endless onslaught of world events, there are times when consumers' reaction is to hold back on spending.

And the phenomenon doesn't affect just older folks — Millennials and Generation Z react the same way.

Nonetheless, there are ways that brands can become part of the solution and not part of the stress. "Shoppers are smarter now," says Emily Hamilton, senior brand experience marketing manager at FRCH Design Worldwide. "They, too, can sense a retailer's or brand's stress when they try to do something that not authentic or genuine to its brand."

Take brand collaboration, not a new concept. "The idea is to take it to the next level," Hamilton says. Grocers might add local produce when it's in season; chains

like West Elm could offer accessories from area designers.

"We think retailers should be moving from transactional to experiential, which drives repeat business," she says.

PRIORITIZING WELLNESS

Along with technology plays, Hamilton has been watching brands respond to the growing interest in wellness. There's quite a bit of activity as evidenced by the rapidly expanding number of organic food lines, athleisure collections, fitness-focused wearables and social workout concepts emerging in the market today.

U.S. consumers continue to push for fresh, whole and real food options, but it's now less about calories and carbs, and more about authentic, safe and honest ingredients and process. The flood of new fast-food assembly restaurants like MOD

Pizza and Sweetgreen might not be the healthiest option, but consumers feel better about eating something if they know the origin of the ingredients and can see it being assembled right before their eyes.

To provide guests with better wellness options, retailers could take notes from the hospitality industry. Programs like RunWESTIN, where New Balance was utilized to provide scenic three- and five-mile running routes near Westin hotels, help guests unwind while taking in the sights. Kimpton is working with San Francisco-based PUBLIC to design stylish bikes for its guests to use free of charge.

And it's hard to think of a location these days more stressful than an airport; Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, San Francisco International Airport and Minneapolis - St. Paul International Airport are offering space for travelers



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to unplug, including in-house yoga studios and walking tracks. No room for a gym? A cup of tea or water can go a long way with stressed-out shoppers.

EXPERIENTIAL PLAY

Give your customers a reason to use all their senses: Provide hands-on opportunities to inspire and educate, where customers can let loose, socialize or just act like a kid again. Host events or offer in-store moments of wow to give customers a sense of childlike delight and surprise. Give their minds a chance to imagine, daydream and be inspired.

Last year’s holiday window displays — from Saks Fifth Avenue’s “Land of 1,000 Delights” with magical landscapes featuring animated creatures and oversized candy to Lord & Taylor’s “enchanted forest” winter wonderland filled with hand-sculpted animals and snow — had viewers daydreaming “once upon a time” at first glance. Brands need to find opportunities to give shoppers a much-needed lighthearted break from reality.

Customers looking to learn new skills want to do so in a relaxing environment. Hands-on classes that inspire and educate can be an opportunity to relax and socialize. Concepts like “Plant Nite” or paint-and-sip classes are unique and fun ways to give consumers an occasion to learn something out of the ordinary and reenergize.

From the Netflix hit “Stranger Things” to the wildly popular Color Run events, adults

are looking for ways to embrace their childhood and be transported back to a time with fewer responsibilities. Brands that create micro-moments to remind shoppers of a simpler time through events, merchandise or environment will leave lasting impressions.

VALIDATING R&R

Hamilton says stressed-out shoppers don’t make for the best customers, citing a recent study by Barclaycard: Some 57 percent of shoppers said they’re less likely to shop with a brand in the future if they experience stress during a visit; 63 percent think retailers should be doing more to relieve shopping stresses.

Hamilton says in-store experiences need to offer customers a safe haven in the chaos — an environment that is comfortable, convenient and calming. Consider offering some of the following amenities.

Stress-free services: Just as relaxed environments are becoming more relevant to young consumers, so too is stress-free service. Even seemingly small changes can have a positive impact on a customer’s experience: Lululemon’s men’s store in New York welcomes customers with cold-brewed coffee and conveniences like an on-site tailor who can hem or customize items.

Offline convenience: Thoughtfulness and convenience are the king and queen

of customer amenities. Young customers especially take notice when brands streamline the shopping process. Apple and Sephora take the highly convenient approach of having the checkout come to the customer rather than the other way around. Brands should focus not only on in-store conveniences, but how to make online returns as seamless as possible. Nordstrom Rack has recently been testing its “Drop & Go” service that allows shoppers to skip the cashier line and get straight to the business of making a return.

AUTHENTICITY COUNTS

Not all good ideas are created equal, of course: While it’s good to try something and “fail fast,” Hamilton issues this caution: “Whatever you decide, it must be authentic, make sense and elevate your brand.”

She cites a short-lived collaboration between Gap and Virgin Hotels wherein Gap used its “Reserve In Store” technology to help travelers staying at a Virgin property. Using the hotel’s mobile app or the Virgin Hotels website, guests could access gap.com to shop and the hotel would take it from there. Guests never need leave their room, instead finding the items they reserved already hanging in their closet.

“What traveler doesn’t like the idea of ordering an outfit and having it delivered because you forgot something, or didn’t pack right?” Hamilton says. “It’s a great idea, but we’re just questioning whether Gap and Virgin Hotels connection was the best [fit].”

As customers buy and return, or stop shopping for a while, a dip in consumer confidence is not a new phenomenon. Most times retail gets stronger for being tested. Hamilton sees a rebound of offline sales as shoppers regain their balance with the new realities.

“We think customers can sense the difference between what’s a forced add-on,” she says, “and what’s really of benefit to them.” **STORES**