

Communicating brands through engagement with 'lived' experiences

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Abstract

As the recent years saw the rapidly decreasing effectiveness of traditional brand communications, event-marketing has emerged as a new breed of communication strategy, which involves target audiences as active participants on a behavioural level. By using a participatory case study method, this paper demonstrates the nature, scope and benefits of event-marketing in differentiating and enhancing customer–brand relationships in relation to a German university. The study concludes that event-marketing facilitates customer engagement with the brand through informal dialogues and personal first-hand brand experiences. Implications for managers are discussed and avenues for further research offered.

INTRODUCTION

Marketers nowadays have to face the fact that the modern brand communication landscape has changed significantly. As an increasing number of industries have reached a state of saturation in recent years, many products have matured to such an extent that they can no longer be distinguished on their quality and functional benefits alone.^{1,2} Subsequently, the role of branding has shifted from originally merely providing a trademark as a means of identification, towards creating unique brand identities through clearly stated

brand values³ that provide the basis upon which consumers are able to differentiate between similar offerings⁴ and experience a subjective contribution to their quality of life.⁵

When it comes to communicating those brand identities and values to their target audiences, however, the strong reliance of brand managers on employing identical symbols and 'standardised' sign values means that many brands within any given industry are perceived by customers as interchangeable.⁶ Indeed, instead of creating unique communication propositions, brand managers tend to

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blur any existing distinctions between their brands even further^{7,8} by making comparable claims⁹ and relying on similar brand communication designs.^{10,11} They even employ the same media channels to push their brand messages towards the consumers as passive recipients. As a consequence, the latter increasingly respond with a number of avoidance strategies, such as zapping, in order to evade the rising information overflow.^{12–14}

This lack of engagement with traditional mass marketing communications in general and advertising in particular is prompting brand managers to seek alternative methods for communicating their brand values.¹⁵ In light of those developments, interactive communication rather than passive persuasion has proven to be a valuable element in building and maintaining brand relationships among customers that drive the brand's image and value.^{16,17} Indeed, as Brown *et al.* have demonstrated,¹⁸ the brand image can be strengthened through interactively communicating a brand story with an idealised community by facilitating shared customer experiences in ways that innovatively communicate brand values. Competitive advantages are increasingly gained by a shift towards the experiential dimension of consumer behaviour, which seeks to form emotional bonds and relationships between consumers and their brands on a behavioural level.¹⁹ Therefore, a strong focus on how customers actually experience the communicated brand and its values is essential for marketing success.²⁰

As a pull strategy within marketing communications, event-marketing offers brand managers a new and

innovative approach in brand communications. For the purpose of this paper, event-marketing is defined as *the interactive communication of brand values by staging marketing events as three-dimensional brand-related hyperrealities in which consumers are actively involved on a behavioural level and which would result in their emotional attachment to the brand.*²¹ In other words, by designing marketing events as interactive brand-related theme parks, the brand hyperreality previously known from advertising is turned into a 'real-lived' multisensual experience for consumers. The fact that customers are encouraged to actively experience brand values on a behavioural level by becoming part of brand hyperreality is the major difference between event-marketing and classic marketing communications.²² In fact, consumers are often highly motivated to participate voluntarily in marketing events, despite knowing that those events are specifically designed to communicate the same brand messages they usually tend to avoid.^{23,24}

The aim of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of how brand values can be better communicated on a behavioural level to both external and internal target audiences through event-marketing as an experiential, interactive communication strategy, thereby strengthening the emotional attachment to the brand²⁵ and enhancing customer-brand relationships in light of a changing communications landscape. A case study demonstrates how brand values can be brought to life and communicated by employing a creative event-marketing strategy. Finally, implications for marketing practice and further academic research are discussed.

'REAL-LIVED' BRAND EXPERIENCES THROUGH EVENT-MARKETING

Although communication has always been recognised as a critical effort in brand marketing, recent research has shown how an increase in interactivity makes communication an even more valuable element, leading to brand relationships that drive the brand's value.²⁶ But how can brand managers achieve this increase in interactivity between their customers and their brands, if the former are less and less willing to engage in traditional forms of brand communications?^{27,28} Furthermore, despite marketers' beliefs to the contrary, why would customers actually want to have a relationship with a product?²⁹ The answer to these questions is very simple and, in essence, just requires an innovative brand communication strategy that pulls consumers to the brand message by providing a stage on which they can satisfy their experiential needs while simultaneously engaging with the brand's hyperreality on an emotional level.

The power of emotional experiences in building brand relationships with consumers is already well documented in the literature.^{30,31} Several authors,³²⁻³⁷ therefore, have proposed experiential marketing as a means of positioning the brand based on its emotional rather than its functional benefits for customers. Pine and Gilmore even suggested that brand managers should offer their products and services for free and charge customers for their enjoyment of the communication experience instead.³⁸ Serious conceptual weaknesses have, however, emerged in the current experiential marketing literature. Despite advocating the promotion of emotional brand ex-

periences, the same old channels are employed to tell customers how they would experience them. Event-marketing, on the other hand, aims to harness the potential for emotional bonds through shared customer experiences by providing brand experiences, entertainment and education which customers perceive as adding to their enjoyment and experienced quality of life.

Historically, event-marketing as an experiential marketing communication strategy first emerged in Germany in the late 1980s in response to significant changes in both the marketing environment and consumer behaviour.³⁹ The idea was to capture the consumer mindset by encouraging active experience of brand values on a behavioural level by allowing consumers to become involved with the brand and become part of its hyperreality. By communicating brand values as 'real-lived' experiences, event-marketing strategies are designed to take particular advantage of the shift from maintenance to experiential consumption in the societal value system of affluent societies.⁴⁰ While maintenance consumption covers the purchase of products for their utilitarian value in solving perceived problems, experiential consumption refers to obtaining enriching experiences through emotional benefits by which consumers attempt to improve the quality of their lives right here and now.⁴¹⁻⁴³ This romantic consumption ethic, in return, has not only led to an increasing orientation towards and active participation in leisure and recreation, entertainment and subcultural neotribes,⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ but has also demonstrated the need for experiential brand com-

munications to gain consumers' attention.

The constitutive features of event-marketing

While event-marketing has already become a very popular element in the marketing communication mix of companies in continental Europe, it has only materialised very recently in Ireland, the UK and the USA as extensions of continental European communication campaigns.⁴⁶ One likely reason for this is that the term *event marketing* has been previously used to describe a multitude of phenomena in marketing practice⁴⁷ ranging from the marketing of events⁴⁸ to event sponsorships⁴⁹ and even sales promotions.⁵⁰ In order to truly understand the communicative innovation of event-marketing, its four constitutive features that differentiate it from event sponsorship need to be discussed now. Those constitutive features are:

- *Experience-orientation*: As personal lived experiences tend to be stronger than 'second-hand' media experiences in determining consumers' notion of reality, consumers are encouraged to experience the brand reality as active participants rather than being passive recipients and, subsequently, are offered a contribution to their subjective quality of life.⁵¹
- *Self-initiation*: Because event-marketing is aimed at influencing consumers emotionally by staging self-initiated marketing events, the marketer is in full control of the way in which sensual brand experiences are anchored in the

world of consumer feelings and experiences.^{52,53}

- *Interactivity*: In contrast to the monological provision of information in classic marketing communications, event-marketing offers a platform for interactive and personal dialogues between participants, spectators and brand representatives.⁵⁴
- *Dramaturgy*: In order for consumers to emotionally experience the lived brand reality, it requires a unique and creative dramaturgy that, similarly to a theatre play, brings the brand image to life and captures the imagination of the target audience. Therefore, the more the event-marketing strategy differs from consumers' everyday life experiences, the higher the degree of activation among consumers.^{55,56}

Thus, in contrast to event sponsorship, event-marketing is aimed at positively influencing customers' familiarity, image, attitude and emotional attachment to the brand by staging self-initiated marketing events as a three-dimensional, brand-related hyperreality for target audiences. And because personally 'lived' experiences tend to be stronger in determining people's notion of reality than the 'second-hand' experiences traditionally communicated by advertising,⁵⁷ marketing events are better equipped to anchor multisensual brand experiences, which include sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, in the world of customer feelings and experiences.⁵⁸ Furthermore, in comparison with classic marketing communication strategies, where customers generally remain passive and distant recipients of brand messages, the major

peculiarity of event-marketing is the fact that target audiences are encouraged to experience the brand's values actively by becoming part of its hyperreality.^{59,60}

Obviously, this also requires brand managers to have a comprehensive understanding of their target audiences' specific emotional needs in order to design event-marketing strategies in a way that makes the latter not want to miss experiencing the brand's hyperreality. By meeting the growing need for experiential consumption, brand managers not only make a contribution to their target audiences' perceived quality of life, but also succeed in establishing brand values through a unique communication proposition and building mutually beneficial customer-brand relationships. In return, event-marketing also offers brand managers a means to engage in dialogues with highly targeted external and internal audiences where they can obtain valuable feedback and feedforward for brand developments as well as a mutually beneficial commitment to shared brand values.⁶¹ The following case study of a German higher education institution illustrates how this works in practice.

METHODOLOGY

Case studies have become one of the most common ways of academic inquiry, providing a deeper insight into a particular issue at hand.⁶² In this regard, the following case study of the Fachhochschule Nordostniedersachsen's *VolgersHall of Fame* provides a practitioner's perspective on how abstract brand values can be communicated as 'real-lived' experiences for consumers by

developing and implementing a creative event-marketing strategy. In addition, the case study could be of particular interest to readers who come from an academic background and who are currently confronted with a changing environment in the higher education sector. As higher education institutions need to be managed more and more as corporate brands, this case study gives an interesting insight into how creative event-marketing can appeal to potential students on a different, socially inclusive level than the traditional presentation of academic courses at open days.⁶³

As the *VolgersHall of Fame* event-marketing strategy was designed, developed and implemented by one of the authors back in 1998, when he was still an undergraduate student at the Fachhochschule Nordostniedersachsen, the method of this case study can broadly be described as participatory action research.⁶⁴ Indeed, because this author was one of the initiators and subsequently in charge of the whole project, this case study provides insight into development and implementation of an event-marketing strategy from a practitioner's point of view. Rich data were gathered from participant observation, articles published in local newspapers and the *VIP!* student magazine^{65,66} as well as documents collected during the development and implementation stages, which were initially kept and filed by one of the authors for sentimental reasons but proved to be valuable for this study. As suggested by Creswell,⁶⁷ this case study provides mainly a retrospective description. Nevertheless, individual themes that have arisen are discussed in more detail for their managerial implications.

THE 'VOLGERSHALL OF FAME'

University background

The Fachhochschule Nordostniedersachsen (FH NON) is a university of applied sciences with approximately 5,000 students located in the north-east of Lower Saxony in Germany. Its various schools are located in the city of Lüneburg (business, social sciences, automation technology, legal studies and business psychology) and the surrounding towns of Buxtehude (architecture and construction studies) and Suderburg (civil engineering). During the 1990s, the FH NON became renowned as a trendsetter for the successful introduction of innovative practice-oriented courses that were sought-after by private industries, specifically business law, automation technology and business psychology. Subsequently, it attracted not only students from the local area, but also from as far as Schleswig-Holstein, Bremen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Indeed, one-third of the FH NON's students were coming from the nearby city of Hamburg despite its own five local higher education institutions. In addition, in various rankings of all German higher education institutions, nearly all schools of the FH NON were regularly placed among the top 30 in their fields. In both business studies and social studies the FH NON was even ranked far higher than its local rival — the well-established University of Lüneburg.

FH NON's strategic brand values

In order to compete directly with the University of Lüneburg, the FH NON positioned itself in accordance with

brand values that were reflected in its strategic objectives:

- To be a regionally-minded higher education institution with three locations.
- To be a cooperative partner for both public institutions and private industry, and to be an influential business factor in the region.
- To enforce actively equality in education and career paths.
- To provide an excellent learning infrastructure.
- To become an internationally-minded, hospitable higher education institution.
- To emphasise innovation in courses, educational methodology and applied research.
- To be a customer-oriented service provider rather than a public institution.
- To be a higher education institution for personalities.

Because the first five objectives reflect standard values that are common to nearly every higher education institution, the FH NON has always placed a strong emphasis on the last three objectives as the brand's key differentiating values. Being innovative as a core value is not only exercised in the introduction of new courses, but also as a means to develop individual personalities both among lecturers and students. The lecturers' practical knowledge, gained by taking one semester every two years to update their current expertise, in combination with the general academic knowledge means that academic theory is taught within a business-relevant context that is of value to both students and potential employers. Staff members are

also encouraged to view themselves as consultants and customer service providers rather than as lecturers and administrators, which allows for a high level of interactivity and a personal relationship between staff members and students. The aim of this customer service orientation is to develop each student's individual potential and creativity in a personal interactive environment by providing active support and professional advice for their ideas and projects and, subsequently, by keeping the student numbers at manageable sizes. The general idea of favouring quality output over quantity output stands in strong contrast to the often overcrowded and impersonal lecturing halls of the universities.

Developing the managerial and creative competencies of students as imaginative problem-solvers has always been nurtured within FH NON as its key brand value for future success. Indeed, creativity and imagination are seen as the central backbone for innovation and entrepreneurship. Consequently, students at all levels are not only taught the theory and second-hand experiences in the form of case studies in class, but are also encouraged to gain first-hand experience by initiating and realising their own ideas for personal projects. By doing so, students are sometimes actively involved in running certain affairs or areas of the FH NON themselves. For example, students at the business school founded the 'ProWirtschaft e.V.' in 1997. This is a financially independent society aimed at improving the learning environment and social conditions for students at FH NON, which is solely managed by students as a genuine small-to-medium sized enterprise (SME) and holds relationships with local businesses.

ProWirtschaft is self-financing by running a store for learning materials and office supplies at highly competitive prices on the Volgershall campus and managing the contracts for all vending machines on campus, such as coffee, cold drinks, snacks or phone cards. The society also provides professional event management, including catering and security for official student parties, concerts, discussion forums and ceremonial festivities, such as graduation or academic seminars. All profits are then re-invested into further student projects, the purchase of new learning material for the library or the provision of student accommodation. Another example is the student magazine *VIP!*, which was also founded by students of the business school back in 1987. Since then, it has developed from a typical self-made 4–8-page photocopied student paper into a successful 52-page high-quality magazine with multi-colour layout in high gloss print and professional editorial standards. In order to ensure editorial independence, *VIP!* is financed by copy sales and the sale of advertising spaces to local businesses. In addition, the student parliament regularly buys space for its announcements.

Problems in communicating brand values through the classic communications mix

Unfortunately, despite its high ranking in academic tables, the unusually high satisfaction rates among current students and graduates and its high recognition within the regional business world, when it came to communicating the brand to external audiences the FH NON faced

major difficulties due to its status as a university of applied sciences. In Lüneburg, in particular, the community's local government and civil service as well as the local media made no secret of favouring the historically well-established University of Lüneburg. Despite the FH NON's academic successes, all its public relations efforts such as press releases or invitations to journalists and local politicians to discussion forums were regularly ignored by the local media, while the University of Lüneburg enjoyed the advantages of widespread media exposure and a strong influential lobby in local politics. In addition, the information brochure only focused on the academic content of studying at the FH NON, but failed to emphasise the social environment as a differentiating factor.⁶⁸ The information brochure was, therefore, interchangeable with those of any other higher education institution and subsequently received very little response from local schools. As a result, the enrolment of school leavers from the local area was declining significantly.

In order to turn the situation around, in 1998 the FH NON invited its senior marketing students to submit new concepts for a more effective communication of its brand values to external target audiences. However, it was the *VolgersHall of Fame* concept that was finally accepted for implementation. This event-marketing was developed by two second semester marketing students (including one of the present authors) during a Friday evening visit to the pub in June 1998, where the first concept was written down on beer mats after a few pints. The title *VolgersHall of Fame* resulted from a play on words to associate the

FH NON with the image of ongoing individual and institutional success stories by combining the Volgershall campus with a hall of fame. Because there was a lack of rock concerts in general and only a very few venues existed for local bands to play in, the concept of the *VolgersHall of Fame* was designed to meet a deficit need of the target audience by presenting a small rock festival in which three young unknown local bands got the chance to support a major, nationally famous rock band and play to a larger audience.

The idea was to kill two birds with one stone. First, a rock event aimed at young people would attract the attention of prospective students and pull them to the campus. Secondly, a rock festival that was headlined by a well-known German band could simply not be ignored by the local media, thus opening up a backdoor for media exposure of FH NON. The key was not merely to sponsor entertainment, but to utilise the rock festival as an interactive platform for communicating FH NON's brand values in an informal atmosphere. To avoid any unnecessary confusion and to keep the brand message as simple but poignant as possible, the organisers focused on the brand value of FH NON being *a place for creative and imaginative personalities*, where students are encouraged to develop and implement their own ideas, as the unique communication proposition. Subsequently, any communication effort was directed at emphasising that FH NON students were organising, financing, managing and executing a professional rock festival on their own initiative rather than the actual rock concert itself. In particular, the fact that the participating students could gain valuable practical

experiences from outside the obligatory course-related projects was presented as the key value that differentiated the FH NON from other higher education institutions. Thus, the concert emphasised a more personal, socially inclusive experience that differed from traditional formal open days.

The *VolgersHall of Fame* event-marketing strategy

The communication process was divided into three main phases: pre-stage, concurrent stage and post-stage. In all three stages, the primary emphasis was placed on communicating the practical activities and experiences of FH NON students, which included a plethora of anecdotes, dealing with unexpected difficulties and, of course, the difference between textbook theory and real-life practice, rather than the concert itself. For example, hiring a major band is not an easy, straightforward process; as becomes clear when dealing with music agents, there are no fixed list prices for artists — fees are agreed on the basis of each case and convenience, and many hidden costs such as hotels, travel, catering, backstage arrangements, etc need to be incorporated as well. A further common experience was the frustration felt in dealing with the local authorities in order to obtain the necessary licences. Furthermore, any successful communication effort requires a number of adequate outlets. Although *VIP!* has always provided the ideal outlet for any internal communication to current students, staff members and other stakeholders, such as alumni, on this occasion, communicating to external audiences required a very different set of channels. By using a famous band's

concert to catch public interest, the local media could be lobbied into publishing regular reports about the *VolgersHall of Fame*, and their desire for interviews with the headline group, the Lemonbabies, was exploited to FH NON's advantage. Meanwhile, the local radio station Radio ZuSa co-operated from the start, ensuring ongoing media exposure in return for exclusive live interviews from the backstage area.

Pre-stage event communication

In the pre-stage phase, print and radio media were used to publish articles and interviews with students who held the key responsibilities for the design, organisation and execution of the *VolgersHall of Fame*. But while the concert acted as a teaser to catch interest, reports and interviews emphasised primarily the personal experience of the student organisers in dealing with bands and their agents in the music industry, the frustration felt in the bureaucratic application process to get permission from the local authorities to hold the event, to have the right to serve alcoholic beverages, or in general about those 'little things' that came up along the way, which nobody had thought of but had to be dealt with. In particular, the learning curve they experienced and its impact on their personal and academic development were outlined in detail. As a more direct approach of interacting with target audiences, the same students also went into local secondary schools to give presentations about the processes and efforts involved in organising a concert. These presentations were primarily given to secondary school students in the 11th–13th grade

who were between 18–21 years old and just about to make the decision whether and where to go to university (note that in Germany, graduates with Abitur — and thus eligible for higher education — are usually between 19–21 years of age, depending on whether they entered school aged six or seven and whether they had to repeat a year due to failing the grade (*Ehrenruade*). However, several younger students from the eight–10 grades, aged between 14–18 years, were also eager to attend. While promoting the concert, the presenters encouraged interactive discussions and emphasised the crucial value of practical experience, which cannot be learned from books or classes, but only can be gained by doing-it-yourself. This point was persistently brought into the context of the learning culture at the FH NON, where students are encouraged to realise their own business ideas and develop their very individual potential, by taking the *VolgersHall of Fame* as a running example.

Concurrent stage event communication

During the event, information material and posters about the FH NON itself, the courses offered, former as well as current research and student projects etc were strategically placed within the automation technology building. At the entry to the building, the FH NON information brochure was handed out together with the sold tickets. Information stands were erected next to the entry/exit area, which was opposite the stage and conveniently close to the bar. The student cinema *Movie* had erected a screen above the stage, where a promotional film about studying at the

FH NON was shown before the concert and between each of the four acts. Media representatives were invited to interview the bands as well as organisers in a specifically set-up VIP and backstage area. Fortunately, the headlining band the Lemonbabies turned out to be very down to earth. They patiently dealt with the nervous organisers in the backstage area, had lots of advice for the local amateur bands, socialised on their own initiative with the audience and, subsequently, contributed significantly to the personal atmosphere and image of the event, while also promoting the FH NON brand. Crucial for prospective students also proved to be the opportunity to interact with current students. A competition was run, which invited students of local secondary schools to submit business ideas they would like to initiate once they had enrolled as students at the FH NON.

Post-stage event communication

The third communication phase after the event was dominated by reviews of the event itself and the learning experience of all the students involved. As long as the media interest persisted, the main aim was obviously to accentuate the FH NON brand values. The responsible students discussed the unforgettable and valuable practical experience they gained from the *VolgersHall of Fame* by sharing anecdotes from behind the scenes, the fun they had in the backstage area and the impression the Lemonbabies made on them. But most importantly they emphasised how much learning from this particular experience contributed to their personal as well as professional development. The FH NON's com-

mitment to its brand value of being a higher education institution for personalities by encouraging extra-curricula practical projects from which to learn from experience, in addition to the teachings of academic theories, was repeatedly brought to attention. A radio show at Radio ZuSa, where listeners could call in, proved to be a particularly valuable follow-up opportunity for building consumer-brand relationships between the FH NON and potential students, as well as the local communities, in an informal and amusing way. Furthermore, the two initiators and lead organisers continued to hold guest presentations at local secondary schools in order to strengthen the emotional effect already established in the build-up to the event.

Leveraging brand values through innovative communication

Of course, the success of any communication needs to be measured and controlled. The success of this event-marketing strategy was measured in terms of media exposure and enrolment figures, simply because these data were readily available. However, several letters from members of the audience added some qualitative feedback as well. As a result of the campaign, the media exposure turned out to be higher than the FH NON had ever previously experienced. Indeed, for the first time FH NON managed to dominate the higher leverage presence in the local media and in secondary schools and to sideline its local rival, the University of Lüneburg. Furthermore, in the following weeks, while being interviewed on the television music channels MTV and VIVA as well as on a number of radio stations, the Lemonbabies continued to praise the professional organisation

and personal atmosphere at the FH NON which provided substantial unpaid celebrity endorsement and exposure. But the ultimate outcome in the aftermath of the *VölgersHall of Fame* was an increase of nearly 20 per cent in the enrolment of new students from the local area who, in their own words, would otherwise have chosen the University of Lüneburg or a university in Hamburg. This suggests that FH NON's brand values were successfully anchored as a multisensual experience in the minds of target audiences by means of this interactive event-marketing strategy.

DISCUSSION

This case study provides a number of themes that warrant further discussion. However, this paper will just focus on five primary themes that are in line with the literature review and evident in this case study.

Emotional brand experiences

Recent research has placed an emphasis on satisfaction for the experiential dimension of consumer behaviour^{69,70} with a view to building emotion and improving consumer brand relationships.⁷¹ This has led to the general misconception in marketing literature that brand experiences can be 'mass produced' and then communicated to consumers.⁷²⁻⁷⁴ The reality, however, is that it is up to the individual consumer to obtain their own unique experiences with the brand.⁷⁵ Thus, experiential brand communication can only provide the platform on which consumers obtain their individual brand experiences.⁷⁶ In this regard, event-marketing as

an experiential brand communication strategy provides consumers with the opportunity to experience the brand on a behavioural level, share those experiences with others, meet previously faceless and nameless brand managers and learn about the brand's values and heritage.⁷⁷

Like many other SMEs, the FH NON had to acknowledge that having a good and prestigious brand is no longer enough to attract new customers (students) in a market that is flooded with identical brand communication efforts. Because the original brand message still focused on the functional (academic) benefits of studying at the FH NON, such as the academic course contents and structures, the primary target audience of students at local secondary schools perceived its brochure as interchangeable, meaningless and boring. Furthermore, Brewster and Jevons also found that traditional open days achieve little more than confirming preconceived opinions.⁷⁸ Instead, they recommended that universities should rather focus their efforts on outlining the social and emotional benefits of studying at their university to prospective students. The *VölgersHall of Fame* addressed this particular issue in detail by using its communication to emphasise the specific brand value that reflects not only the social, interactive dimension of studying at the FH NON, but also the nurturing of individual creativity in noncurricular activities.

Knowing your customers means being one of them

Knowing your customer is a well-praised credo in marketing literature and practice⁷⁹⁻⁸¹ to which there is little

to add. Indeed, a detailed understanding of consumers' experiential needs and motivations is essential in the design of any event-marketing strategy, because, as a pull strategy within marketing communications, its success is dependent on the voluntary participation of the target audiences.^{82,83} In the case of the *VölgersHall of Fame*, it seemed that communication efforts that are traditionally employed in the higher leverage education sector were increasingly 'out-of-touch' with school leavers. Conversely, the students at the FH NON were not only much closer in age and taste to their prospective successors, but they also often frequented the same bars, nightclubs and other venues as the senior students at secondary schools. Thus, it was quite easy to establish that a lack of rock concerts in Lüneburg was considered as a problem for both secondary school and higher leverage students. Furthermore, the language spoken by young people translated quite naturally into the presentations at the secondary schools. Subsequently, many senior students at the secondary schools perceived the interactive conversation with FH NON students as more honest and interesting than the formal talks held by career guidance counselors or official university representatives.

As a precursor to a successful event-marketing strategy, it is also critically important that the brand has in place a strategic vision from which brand values can be clearly defined. Only then can an event-marketing strategy be effective in executing a brand's message in a unique way that will appeal to an accessible target audience in an ever-dynamic communications landscape. The FH NON

had a strong set of strategic objectives present, which lent themselves as brand values. Nevertheless, its nourishment of individual creativity and imagination among its students, so that they could develop essential managerial and creative competencies as problem-solvers, was readily identified as the key brand value distinguishing the FH NON and its students from competition. By interacting with FH NON students as *one of them* in an informal, social environment, prospective students were given the opportunity to feel the implementation of this brand value for themselves, which made the brand experience even more real and believable.

David and Goliath

Given the stiff competition in the current brand communication landscape, the David and Goliath allusion is obvious from the outset. Despite the academic successes, the FH NON is a relatively small brand in a very large market that is dominated by several larger, established players. But more important is the fact that access to certain media outlets and public services is often restricted by the strong lobby that major established players — in this case the University of Lüneburg — usually enjoy for various reasons. Thus, the FH NON's only chance to succeed against its larger, stronger and more established rival in the current brand communication landscape was by avoiding the traditional channels and establishing an interactive direct relationship with the target audience.

The *VölgersHall of Fame* provided the FH NON with a means to sidestep those restrictions and to differentiate the brand in the eyes of the target audience by offering something that

was not only outside the norm but also closer to the hearts and interest of prospective students. Indeed, by employing an event-marketing strategy the FH NON was also able to focus the participating target audiences' attention on its brand message while keeping out intrusive brand messages from competitors. Furthermore, the socialising effect of personal interaction remains longer in the consumer's memory than advertising messages. In other words, the smaller player must become known as belonging to the crowd competing against the almighty big boys, simply because people love an underdog.

Teasing (you want it, but you can't have it!)

In his article about the Harry Potter phenomenon, Brown argued that the traditional marketing philosophy of making products as easily and readily available to customers as possible has outlived its relevance in current marketing environments and attributed the success of the publisher Bloomsbury to its teasing strategy, which proclaimed the limited availability of the books at launch and denied prior access for critics and reviewers.⁸⁴ A similar you-want-it, but-you-can't-have-it philosophy was applied in dealing with the local media during the *VölgersHall of Fame* campaign. One could easily view it as revenge for the general media neglect that the FH NON had previously suffered. A well-managed event, in particular a concert with a major national rock act as the headliner, always draws a large number of people and is therefore also of interest to the media.

But the reality is that the media would only be interested in an (exclusive) interview with the headliner of the concert — the Lemonbabies. Indeed, in an age of limited media space, even the local media has become accustomed to expect event organisers to ‘bribe’ them with free VIP and backstage access in return for any coverage. By actively denying this to the local media, and allowing limited backstage access to interview a major rock act only in return for the extended coverage of the brand message in the form of interviews with the organisers over several weeks, the media interest in the *VölgersHall of Fame* actually multiplied and mutually beneficial concessions were made that satisfied both parties. Of course, this worked in Lüneburg because a major rock concert is still a rarity. As Brown so pointedly observed, people always have a stronger desire for the things they cannot have than for the ones that are readily available.⁸⁵ The same seems to be true for the media.

Creativity is relative

Creative event-marketing strategies allow consumers to experience the brand’s hyperreality as active participants. The irony is that consumers participate in such brand hyperrealities, even though they are specifically designed to communicate the same brand messages that they tend to avoid in traditional communication channels.⁸⁶ As the degree of activation depends to a certain extent on the dramaturgy, Sistenich proposed that the more the event’s dramaturgy differs from the consumer’s everyday experience, the stronger the pull effect will be.⁸⁷ Consequently, it

would require a creative and unique dramaturgy to allow for such extraordinary brand experiences. Therefore, Sistenich’s proposition seems to call for brand managers to engage in expensive, large-scale spectacles in order to communicate brand values effectively. Wohlfeil and Whelan also argued that à la carte marketing events or me-too events, which are built on once-successful-always-successful formulas, are always doomed to failure.⁸⁸

Like many creative ideas that emerge at unusual places under unusual circumstances, the *VölgersHall of Fame* was developed by two second semester marketing students while drinking a few pints in Lüneburg’s Irish pub, to a background of live music. Although an understanding of the target audience’s experiential needs and an in-depth knowledge of the brand values to be communicated are essential, what is even more important in developing a creative event-marketing strategy is to have the critical imagination to combine them together as a platform for emotional brand experiences. Therefore, creative event-marketing strategies do not require being large-scale spectacles. Instead, brand managers need to realise that what is extraordinary and differs from one’s everyday life experience is relative to the individual context of the particular target audience.

Although a concert, which featured as the dramaturgy of the *VölgersHall of Fame*, does not appear to be very creative on the first view, a concert in Lüneburg was an extraordinary event for young people. It is very likely that the *VölgersHall of Fame* concept would probably not have worked in a city like Hamburg or London, where a

variety of concert venues cater for every taste, and where both consumers and the media are spoiled for choice. In Lüneburg, on the other hand, a major rock band had not played for years and young people had to travel to Hamburg in order to enjoy such a concert. Consequently, a concert headlined by the Lemonbabies was, even for the local media, the event of the year. However, although the Lemonbabies were an essential element, the essential idea was to invite young people as potential prospects onto the FH NON campus to experience this particular higher education brand in the informal, relaxed atmosphere of a rock concert, by enabling them to interact and socialise with other audience members, current FH NON students and even musicians, rather than the formal, even sterile atmosphere of the usual open days. And here lay the real creative element of the *VölgersHall of Fame* event-marketing strategy.

CONCLUSION

Given the well-documented problems of traditional communications, such as advertising and direct marketing, there is a clear need for academics and practitioners alike to re-evaluate the means by which brand messages are best conveyed. Greater attention has been paid recently to the role of experience in brand performance, and how experience and interaction between internal and external brand representatives can sustain consumer brand relationships, as they co-produce added value. Such relationships are built on trust and an emotional bond between the brand and the consumer, facilitated through brand values.

Of vital importance is the need to define and understand brand values within the organisation before attempting to communicate them externally. As an innovative communication strategy, event-marketing stages three-dimensional, brand-related hyperrealities, whereby the brand message is turned into a 'real-lived' multisensual brand experience, resulting in a strengthened emotional attachment to the brand. Event-marketing also facilitates voluntary dialogue and interaction between highly targeted participants, both internally and externally. This provides valuable feedback and feedforward to brand development strategies and helps to obtain a mutually beneficial commitment to a shared brand vision through the co-production of a brand's added value. There is considerable scope for further research in this area. Thus, some further research avenues have been suggested.

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