

Column Title: **As The Saw Turns**

Article Title: **The Exhibit as a Sensory Experience**

I had a very interesting sensory experience recently. Actually to be perfectly accurate, it was more of a 'lack-of-sensory' experience. I came back from my last long business trip with a cold. (Anymore, every long trip on an airline ends with a cold...have they not figured out how to clean the air in an airplane yet?). The cold progressed to my lungs and then filled my head, to the point where I could not smell or taste. While I had this cold, I happened to have a dental appointment, where part of the procedure was to deaden my mouth.

On the day of the dental appointment, I was scheduled to have dinner with a client. We took him to a very nice Italian restaurant. It wasn't until the dinner arrived that I realized how ridiculous this whole scene was. The food in front of me *looked* delicious. However, not only could I not *smell* the aroma of Italian seasonings...and not only could I not *taste* the rich mixture of flavors, but I couldn't *feel* it either! I have no idea what we talked about at dinner...I was too focused on making sure the food stayed in my mouth. I wasn't sure if I was chewing noodles or my tongue.

Here I was, in a very nice restaurant, and I was without three of the four key senses required to enjoy this meal. (I usually don't think of the fifth sense, hearing, as a requirement to enjoy a meal...if I'm hearing my food, there could be a whole different set of issues at play...). The thought did cross my mind that I should enter a hot pepper eating contest...I wouldn't have tasted or felt anything. Although things could have gotten rough a few hours later...

What a bizarre experience. What a realization of how important the interplay of the senses is. With only one sense (sight) active, there was almost no point in eating...I got nothing out of the meal other than basic nourishment.

(Look out...here comes the segway...)

So how many exhibits have you walked by on the show floor that addressed only one of the senses? Sure, you saw it, but there was absolutely nothing to cause you to even slow down, much less stop to see what was going on. How important are *all* the senses in creating an environment that attracts – and keeps – prospects in your exhibit?

A few years ago, I read Jim Gilmore's book "The Experience Economy", where he addresses this very issue. (In fact, he has been a speaker at the annual Exhibitor Show every year since the book came out.) The concept is pretty simple: the more senses you can activate during the experience, the more memorable it will become.

How can we take this concept and use it in trade show planning...essentially creating a sensory experience for attendees? It would seem that the experience of an individual exhibit is the natural progression of trade show marketing. It's kind of like the experience of shopping vs. purchasing on the internet...why trade shows and shopping will never go away...the experience. My wife would never shop on the internet. For her, it's all about the experience...seeing, touching, talking.

In his book, Gilmore talks about 'THEMEing' events, where the word THEME represents an acronym. It is not much of a leap to begin to apply this to trade show exhibits.

T Theme the experience. Create a theme consistent with your company's culture. Alter the guest's sense of reality. Think of themes that work...Planet Hollywood, Hard Rock Café, NASCAR Café, Medieval Times, Borders, Fremont

Street Experience...Borders is not just about buying books...it's about the reading experience...quiet places, soft seating, a coffee bar.

H Harmonize impressions with positive cues. Cues give off impressions. Impressions support the theme. Impressions are the take-away of the experience. Progressive Insurance dispatches its claims adjusters to the location of your accident. It offers you a cell phone to call a loved one. You sit on a couch in a Progressive van to handle the details, and 95% of the time, you receive a check on the spot.

E Eliminate negative cues, and anything that detracts from the theme. Consider what real message signs and scripts are giving off. Every part of the experience should support the theme. Rainforest Café announces for all to hear "Smith party, your adventure is about to begin!" Disney characters never step out of character when in public areas of the park.

M Mix in memorabilia – a tangible artifact of the experience. Participants should want a reminder of the experience. Teens collect T-shirts to remember rock concerts. People buy Hard Rock Café shirts to show others that they have been to Cancun or London.

E Engage all five senses – At the Rainforest Café you encounter the sound "Sss-sss-zzz". Then you see the mist and feel it soft and cool on your skin. You smell its tropical essence and taste its freshness. It's impossible to be unaffected by these sensory-filled cues. The more sensory the experience the more memorable it will be.

In trade show marketing we talk about pre-show, at-show and post show tactics to support the objectives we've established for the show. The question is can you take this one step further to create an experience for your audience? Can you engage all five senses? Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch. What if you

could design less for functionality and more for senses; less for portability, more for memorability?

What if you could use sensory experiences to remove the guest from the “convention center” and place them in the experience of your exhibit?

See you on the show floor!

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