

The Beginner's Guide to Brand Activation Strategy

A comprehensive guide for brands and agencies to understand the foundations of developing an engaging brand activation strategy.

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Introduction

“Brand Activation” is the art of driving consumers to action through brand sponsored interaction and experiences. It’s about bringing brands to life and forming long-term emotional connections with consumers. The ultimate goal of a brand activation is to attract, engage, and motivate consumers at various points along the path to purchase.

This comprehensive guide, we will help brand marketers, event coordinators, and customer experience coordinators understand the foundations of developing an effective brand activation strategy. It will also serve as a resource for marketers looking to enable activations in the digital-first era.

To do this, keep the following principles in mind as you plan your next activation:

Key Principles

- **Insights Drive Ideas:** Inspire demand for your brand by tapping into consumer insights and passions that will lay the foundation for your creative ideas and executional strategies.
- **Timing & Place Is Everything:** Connecting with consumers at a time that is convenient for them and at various points (places) along the path to purchase is key.
- **Invite Participation:** At every touch point, ask consumers to do something. Invite them along the journey and push them down the path to purchase.

Advantages of brand activations

There are a number of proven benefits of consumer activations:

- Acquire relevant customer data and opt-ins
- Acquire consumer feedback in real-time as they interact with your brand.
- Reach new audiences that have yet to engage with your brand.
- Reinforce your brand’s position in the market.
- Cuts through traditional advertising clutter (TV Commercials, Print, Web Ads)
- Make your brand more relevant.

Strategies for implementing a consumer brand activation campaign

Now that we have considered the “what” and the “why” of brand activations, we can begin to explore the types of brand activations that are most effective today.

Brand activations can take several forms. Here are some of the most popular types of brand activations:

- Experiential marketing
- Digital marketing campaigns
- Sampling campaigns
- In-store events
- Promotions
- Social media contests and movements

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Experiential events

Experiential Marketing (XM) is used by global brands to intercept consumers and emotionally engage with them on a one-on-one personal level. Events are tactics designed to give people the opportunity to interface with a product, engage in a dialogue with experts, and feel more connected with a brand.

This can be achieved by blending physical and digital experiences together, so that the participants are encouraged to play apps and games, have their photos taken or ride on virtual reality car and bike simulators. In most cases, brands will employ an external vendor to help them achieve these tactics.

The purpose is to reach people on multiple personal levels (emotional, rational, psychological) so that they walk away from the experience emotionally connected to the brand.

Digital marketing campaigns

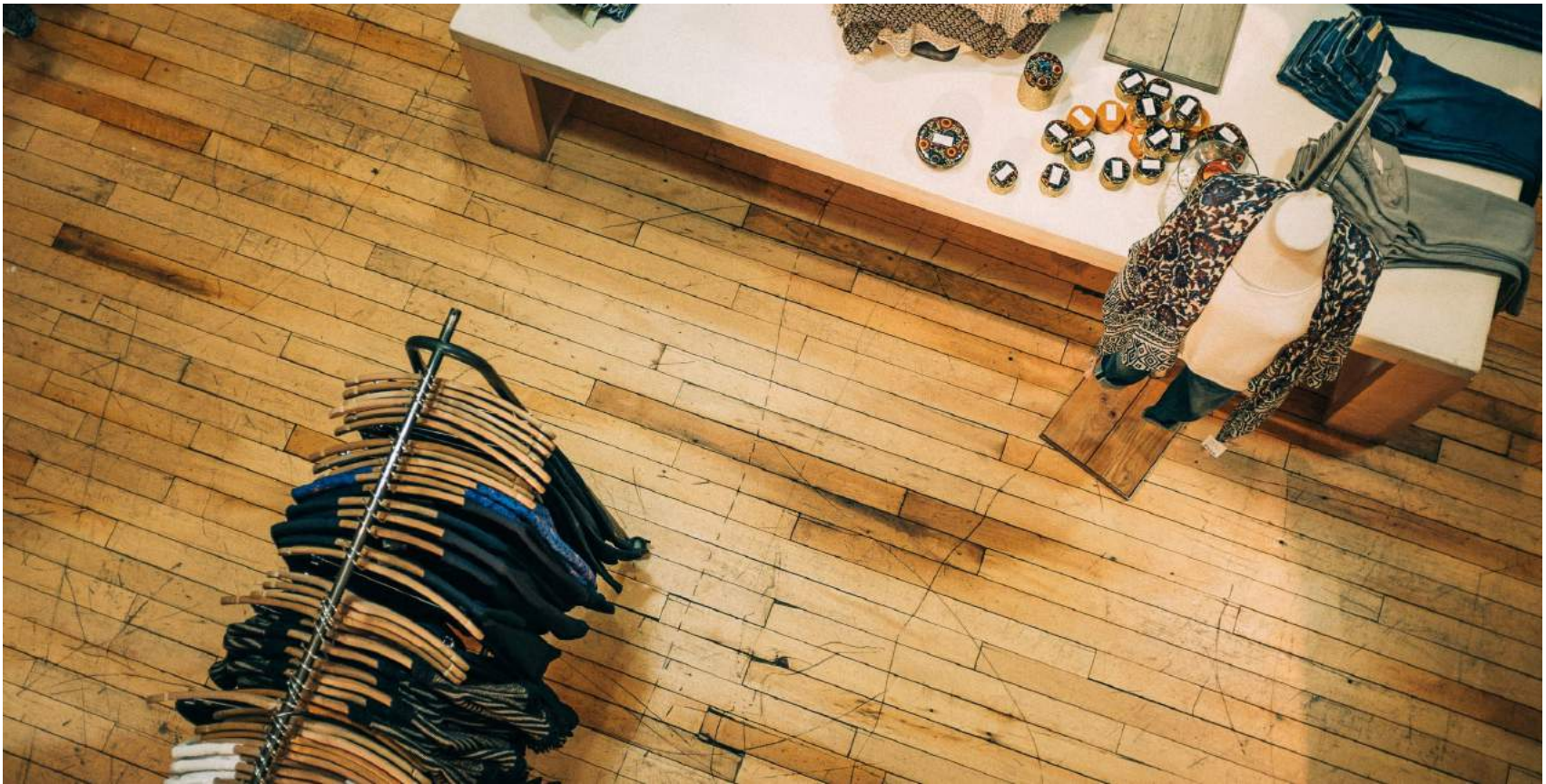
Experiences are not one-dimensional, they can happen in-person and online. In fact, consumers are much more likely to engage in online experiences, or with experiences that include a digital component. Digital marketing campaigns make it possible to reach audiences beyond physical interactions. It gives marketers the ability to collect data and gain insights for improving marketing and sales systems. Typically digital marketing is a component of a larger brand activation, and is used to compliment campaigns in-field/in-market.

Sampling campaigns

A sampling campaign is when a brand is able to get their product into the lives of their potential consumer. An effective sample campaign starts with determining a target audience. Getting the right person to try your product and tell others about their positive experience can really boost awareness and sales.

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In-store retail marketing

In-store retail marketing activations can help a customer choose one brand over another in a physical setting. It helps to enhance the image of a product or brand and as well as feature the benefits it offers or introduce the lifestyle associated with purchasing the product. There are different types of retail marketing, a brand can be activated using point of purchase displays, attractive design or hosting, retail product launch experiences that allow consumers to experience and try a particular product.

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Promotional marketing

Promotional marketing involves raising awareness of your brand and its products in order to generate more sales and gain a loyal customer base. The targeting of promotional marketing can take many forms, it can be targeted at businesses, retail and wholesale companies or it can be targeted at the end consumer. Consumer promotions can be executed by using reward loyalty programs, contests, sweepstakes, giveaways, special offers, product samplings as well as point of sale displays.

Digital rewards are becoming more popular as consumers prefer mobile interactions over other channels.

Business promotions can be used in workshops, event sponsorships, trade show booths and direct mail campaigns. Wholesale trade promotions may consist of using incentives, or providing entertainment value or other methods like bonuses to reward resellers.

Social media engagement

Social media engagements are typically a layer, or an element of a larger brand activation. It is a way to drive engagement with your brand and keep consumers interested. Most brand activations utilize social media in some shape or form, but as this article points out, only a few brands are using social to the fullest extent. With experiential marketing on the rise, marketers have to stay competitive to get the most out of their brand activations. Social media can amplify an event, generate buzz, increase brand awareness, and so much more. With that said, brands should be taking advantage of all that social media has to offer. By combining social media strategies with brand activations, marketers can rise above the rest.

By keeping the approaches mentioned above in mind, we can now tackle the methodology behind crafting an engaging brand activation.

How to Create a Brand Activation that Drives Engagement

Now that we have outlined the types of activations to choose from, you can now begin preparing your strategy. The following steps will guide you through a cyclical process that marketers follow from the creation phase to the evaluation phase of a brand activation.

This guide is divided into four sections to help make this easy to follow and reference in the future. For the purpose of this guide the five main tiers for creating a brand activation that drives engagement are:



1. Experiential marketing
2. Digital marketing campaigns
3. Sampling campaigns
4. In-store events
5. Promotions
6. Social media engagement

The first 3 areas (Analyze, Strategize, and Design) are where you'll spend the majority of your time prior to the launch of your activation. The planning and pre-planning stages are necessary steps for developing your brand activation, and should not go overlooked. The process is outlined in the order of how major brands develop their activation strategy.

To prepare you'll need to bring strategy (thinking) and creativity (action) together to prototype the best ways to deliver your message. Here you and your team should use a combination of rational and emotional insights that appeal to as many of the senses as possible to ensure customers receive the message on many levels.

1. Analyze.

Do a SWOT analysis: What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and capabilities as a brand?

Brand activations can vary from highly expensive and resource intensive product launch campaigns to simple, creative installations.

The type of marketing activation you develop will depend on your capabilities, resources, and budgets. Spend some time on a suitable analysis of your present brand image as well as the team.

Ask yourself questions like:

- Is my brand already known?
- How familiar are people with the organization?
- What is the current sentiment, positive or negative, of our brand?
- What are our core strengths and what are our best attributes?
- Do we have access to agency or creative partners that can assist our team?

Answers to all these questions would help you identify and assess your capabilities to achieve your winning concept and execute different brand activations.

The biggest advantage of getting clarity on these questions at the planning stage is to help you form a coherent, uniform strategy for your upcoming brand activations.

Then, determine your target audience...

One of the first steps in crafting an effective brand activation is to determine who you want to attract. As with any marketing campaign, you cannot appeal to everyone, your brand must identify the market it will resonate with most. This could be based on any number of criteria.

For instance, it could be a geographical region, an age bracket, or a particular income segment. It will depend on what is being promoted and the goal of your campaign. The idea is to explore and know the utility of your product/brand well enough to determine who would gain the maximum value from it.

This knowledge is crucial to thinking of creative ways to launch an activation campaign that can emotionally appeal and connect with your target audience.

Once you have determined the winning concept and target market for your brand, it is time for some self-reflection and assess your capabilities as a team.

2. Strategize

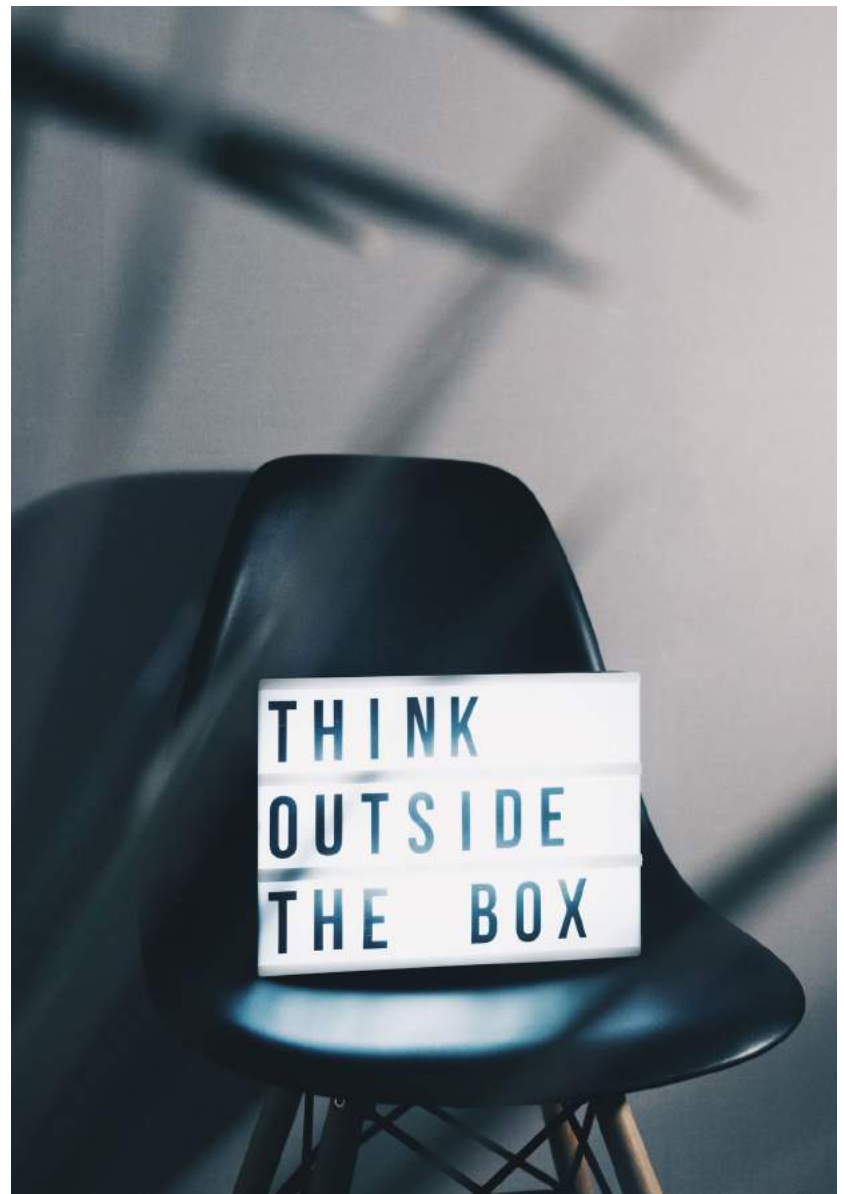
What tactics we can use to achieve your goals?

At this stage of preparing a strategy for brand activation, you need to explore what tactics are at your disposal instead of planning how to do it. Figure out the “what” and “why” in this phase and leave the “how” to the planning stage of individual product marketing campaigns.

Of course not every idea will be feasible but marketers often table ideas that are within reach of their budget and resources.

Think of the different tactics you can use to reach out to your target market and communicate the right message. Some of these include, but are not limited to:

- Product demonstration installations (For e.g. booths or interactive kiosks)
- Mobile vans to spread your message
- Mixed Reality / Augmented Reality Brand Activations



You might go for different promotional tactics for different product marketing activations depending on:

- Location
- Audience
- Context

Once you have established your ideas, you'll need to determine what is the best avenue to accomplish your goals. Keep in mind why a particular event marketing tactic might be effective for your purpose.

Set your budget guidelines

When you invest in a brand activation, you want to make sure it pays off. The money you put into the activation should return in the form of leads, conversions, and new brand ambassadors (and word of mouth marketers). To ensure a brand gets the most ROI from an activation it's important to set budgets to work within.

Be clear about goals

The only way to keep a tight and measurable budget is to set clear expectations from your brand activation.

Clearly articulate the goals you want and need consumers to do. (For example: Fill out a form for data collection, drive in-store sales, boost social media followers etc.). Your budget should focus on accomplishing your ultimate goal and the path to achieving this. By defining your goals upfront, and then only spending money on things that help you reach them, you can ensure you're not wasting precious marketing or advertising dollars on the activation or event.

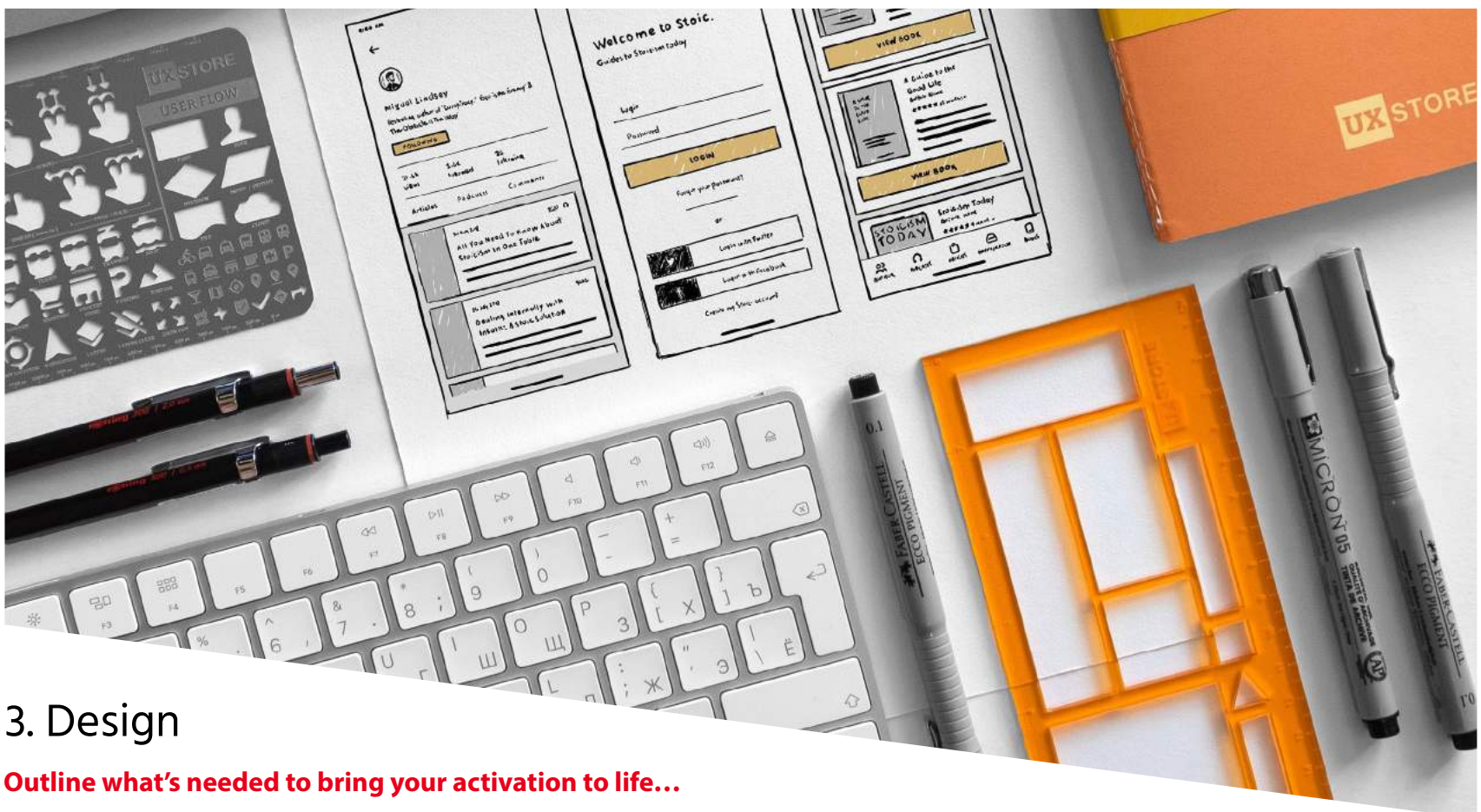
If you work for a brand, or at an agency, it's important to ensure everyone involved with this activation is on board with the budget, and is clear about where the money is being spent. This will ensure that all parties have taken responsibility for the costs involved to execute the activation, and understands that last minute changes will be at a price. In many instances marketers want to change user flow, copy, and even the experience itself. These changes come at a price, and everyone should be aware in advance that a clear vision on spend will save you time and money in the end.

The system could be setting up a general workflow based on mutual consensus and assigning the high-level hierarchy of responsibilities to oversee all the engagement marketing activations. Here you will include high level information about possible vendors and those who will plan, execute, and manage all the engagement marketing activations.

For example, for different brand activations running over a long period of time, you can set up a planning team, execution team, and management team while shaping the product activation strategy.

Ensure that people in these teams understand and formulate all brand activation plans based on the strategy you have developed for your brand.

Moreover, a well-executed brand activation campaign contains many different touchpoints. Each touchpoint needs a specifically adapted creative, media liaison and analytics monitoring.



3. Design

Outline what's needed to bring your activation to life...

This is the final phase in developing your brand activation strategy. Once you have figured out your concept, target audience, capabilities, and marketing tactics, you need to bring them all together. This is usually done with a creative brief and a meeting that provides further insight into your brief.

Once you have agreed on the brief, you can start forming a system, and putting a team in place that can formulate the brand activation strategy and start planning the event marketing process.

The most streamlined, time-saving approach is to create a set of design ingredients upstream—key visuals, grids, logos, colors, product shots, sales messages, etc. that you can easily re-size or re-task for different media.

Having all this organized saves a lot of time downstream. You can use the extra time on analytics and on making improvements. One of the main hindrances to brand activation success is when an agency runs out of resources due to the need for so many design adaptations at once.

4. Execute

Execution will depend on how long your activation runs for, and the tactics used to make it a reality. So, this stage will depend highly on the specific needs of a campaign but there are some things to keep in mind upon launching your brand activation.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to ensure a successful execution:

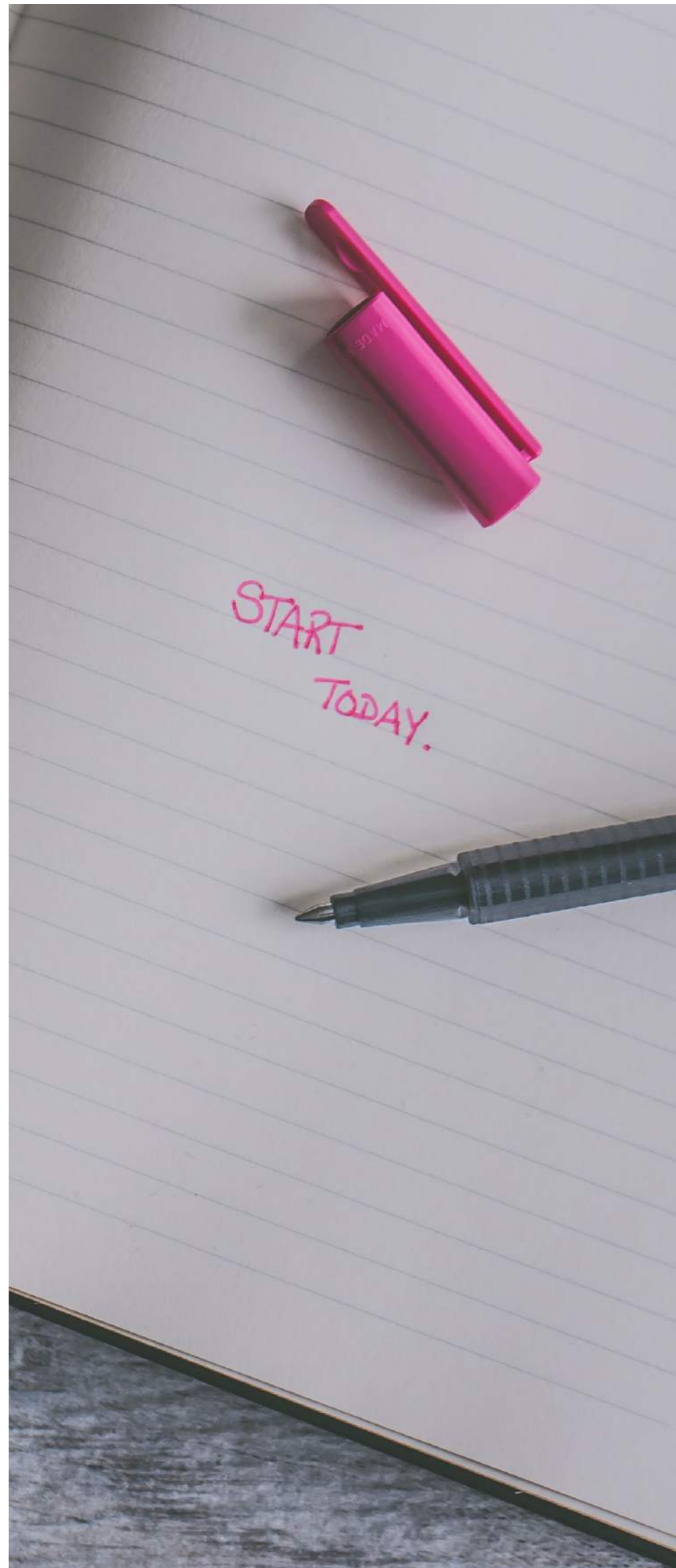
Pre-Launch

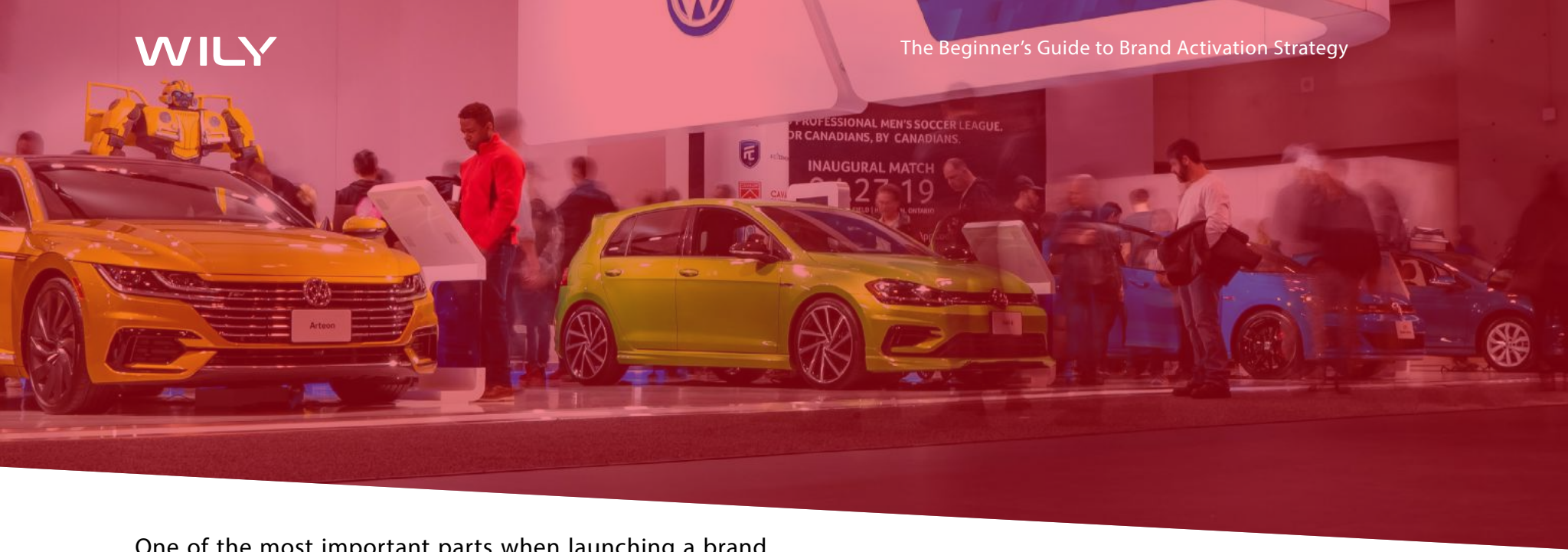
- How can we pre-promote our experience in a compelling way?
- How will this pre-promotion not only create buzz, but provide our target audience a way to evaluate our brand or product.
- How can we utilize social networks, online media, public relations and our web presence to drive this interaction?
- How will the brand look and sound during this phase of promotion and consumer interaction?
- How will all this pre-activity or promotion drive interest for our on-site experience?
- How will our on-site activity continue the consumer's active evaluation of our brand?
- How will, or can technology take our consumer experience to new heights?
- What kind of pertinent content can we create during our event?

Getting audiences to pay attention...

It's vital to have a promotional strategy in place when you launch your activation. Many brands do not spend enough time on this and wonder why an activation is not generating the hype they anticipated.

Use social media platforms to engage consumers, use regular digital marketing techniques to continue building awareness of your brand, and tackle content marketing to develop your business' voice and reputation as a thought leader. Don't think of a brand activation as a marketing experience that can stand alone. Instead, think of it as the great big brand marketing party that paves the way for the rest of your marketing efforts.





One of the most important parts when launching a brand activation is to promote it. Oftentimes marketers are caught up in the development phase they forget about promoting the experience itself. If no one knows you're hosting a brand activation, no one will show. A smart promotional strategy is an essential component of any experiential marketing activation. A few tactics for promoting your activation include:

- **A press release, pre-event buzz**
- **A social media campaign**
- **Blog posts**
- **A shout-out in an industry newsletter**
- **Radio/print ads**

If you build it, they will likely come, but only if they know about it.

On the day of the activation, your team should be working to reach target audiences and harnessing multiple channels to attract consumers. Consider asking the following questions to ensure you are doing the most upon executing your activation during the event.

During the Event

- How are we pushing out our event activities and content via digital, social and web during activation?
- Does our program provide enough brand interaction time for our consumer to make a connection?
- Do our event activities drive the consumer to increase purchase intent and foster loyalty?
 - What consumer information can we gather on site in order to develop a longer relationship?
 - How can we gather, store and utilize that CRM information?
 - How do we survey consumers to see if they engaged with the brand prior to that day's activation?
 - Was that brand engagement driven by our pre-event activities?

After an event is complete, that does not mean communication with consumers ends. This is the time where your brand is still fresh in their minds, and you can more readily drive consumers to take action. Here are some questions you should ask post-event to maximize results from your brand activation:

Post-Launch

- How will we communicate with our core target post event?
- How can we post-promote the experience in a compelling way?
- How will this post-promotion build on our initial buzz, and provide our audience with a way to continue evaluating or considering our brand or product?
- How will we utilize social networks, online media, public relations and our web presence to drive this post-event interaction?
- How will our content be pushed out post event?
- How will success be measured and will our metric prove the event was a success?
- How will we take advantage of the CRM data we've collected onsite?
- How will the next event continue the momentum that we've started?

A fully integrated approach to your experiential marketing program is a must in today's competitive landscape. If you do not connect early and provide your target consumer the opportunity to engage with your brand in multiple ways before, during and after your experience, you are doing your brand a disservice.

5. Evaluate

When you undertake a brand activation campaign, it's an opportunity for great qualitative feedback. Decide on the best key performance indicators (KPIs) for each channel to use as a measurement. Set up all the analytics tools.

Remember that brand awareness is often important but it may not be as important as sales increases in brand activations. Look at the campaigns' ability to capture emails, likes, and customer data. Monitor the ripple effect of shared media through social sharing. Consider how the campaign can be amplified and recalibrated based on your findings.

Small adjustments in the message based on insights can help you to reach other segments, such as millennials.

Brand activation is about creating brand experiences, rather than a choice between A and B for the consumer. Harness as many analytics resources as you can, to view performance, and create a detailed set of design ingredients ahead of time to ensure the process is streamlined.

When you want to create a brand activation campaign, the underlying objective should be to develop a two way conversation with your customers.

Consumer brand activations help to bring life into a company and can build a very loyal fan base while also exciting internal staff. The caveat is you need to create engaging and memorable experiences that strike real emotions with

So, how can you determine whether or not your activation is successful? The following metrics are ones your brand should consider when evaluating the effectiveness of a brand activation:

Metrics to consider for brand activation campaigns

Here is a list of some of the measurement factors to keep in mind when evaluating your brand activations.

- **Consumer reach** | How many targeted consumers did this campaign activation touch and reach? Is it a national scale, worldwide tour, city wide or hyper local? How did it perform at reaching those audiences?
- **Brand relevance** | Did this activation strategy and campaign remain consistent with the brand's message and core values?
- **Return on investment** | Can you measure the benefits vs the cost? However, activation awareness campaigns are not always measured in financial terms and sales. If this is the case, were you able to capture consumer data, such as emails, social media followers and other future marketing leads and opportunities?
- **Long term potential** | Did this activation campaign give the brand any potential to gain sizeable long term benefits?
- **Integration capabilities** | Did this brand activation campaign compliment and have the ability to integrate with other types of marketing channels within the company?
- **Uniqueness** | Did your brand showcase a unique value or selling proposition that got consumers attention and made them want to talk about it?
- **Amplification** | Is it possible if needed to be able to make changes in order to increase the amplification of the overall activation campaign?

Event marketers should keep these metrics in mind to effectively evaluate the success before and after an activation campaign. This will help to speed up the development of future experiences and enable brands to make necessary changes for more improved activations.

Conclusion

Do not underestimate the influence of experiential brand activations can play shaping the future and relevance of your brand. Brand activations should not be looked at as just a tactic or a complement to your traditional/sports marketing campaign. Experiential marketing is an integral part of any effective integrated brand strategy, and literally has the power to bring your brand to life across all mediums. This sounds simple in theory, but now you need to ask the right questions, find the right answers and make it happen.

Brand activations should be viewed as a way to generate awareness and visibility for a company through cultivating real life engagement experiences with the target consumer.

A brand activation is an important marketing element for a brand. However, keep in mind that it must exist as part of a larger marketing strategy that will sustain the engagement of consumers and growth over time. Once you've focused on and executed your brand activation, rely on other marketing campaigns, platforms, and methods to continue consumer engagement.

To learn more about how to develop effective brand activations connect with WILY.

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