

Experiential marketing - The Dark Knight

 By [Mike Silver](#)

1 Jul 2011

When Christian Bale donned his plastic body suit to fight Gotham City's evil-doers, he was near invincible in his vigilantism crusade. In an environment fraught with corruption, inefficiency and lack of service delivery, Batman's approach was really a last resort for a desperate city in search of freedom.

In the case of our friends over at the tobacco & drinks industry, it would appear available avenues for enduring success are similarly limited. Unlike Gotham City, their challenges stem from proactive social legislation. Moreover, their fight is for brand recognition and commercial success as opposed to crime-free streets. These two points aside, both the dark city and the dark markets have found themselves in forced unions of sorts with their respective Dark Knights.

First introduced in 1993, the Tobacco Control Act crystallised how tobacco products were 'extremely injurious to the health of both smokers or non-smokers'. As such, almost annual amendments to the Act saw the noose tightening around both consumption and communication of products. It is from the latter virtual marketing blackout that the term 'dark market' was coined.

Rules of engagement change

Gone were the days of cinema ads portraying fit and healthy models swan diving off the side of yachts in the Caribbean, shortly before lighting up. The rules of engagement now meant that that share of mind could only be achieved in cluttered and noisy on-trade environments (bars/clubs/festivals etc). Even then, legislators were keeping up with creative directors as owned events (think Lucky Strike parties), product sampling and even consumer dialogue became outlawed or regulated. And so an open-armed, smokey invitation was extended to the world of brand experience.

What we have seen domestically is a rat race of sorts among tobacco brands to: A. Identify the correct spaces to engage consumers in and B. Develop innovative experiential concepts to build brand awareness and affinity. The first point has seen brands aligning themselves as 'tobacco partners' with various on trade venues, festivals and events ensuring a constant presence in the lives of targeted consumers. While this has ensured 'pleather' white lounge suites & 'vending machines with heart beats' (brand ambassadors) in these spaces, experientially, these activations lack creative and differentiated concepts.

Pushing the envelope

Philip Morris though has consistently shown to be pushing the envelope. While playing within the boundaries of legislation, their campaigns have looked to create opportunities for consumers to engage the brand (and not *vice versa*, which is restricted on numerous fronts). Their smoking lounge décor and staff uniforms draw attention from the crowd as does their 'Marlboro Scooter' mob activation stationed outside various on trade outlets. Marlboro's Blue Ice variant as even used the product itself as a brand experience through the menthol 'click' ball inside the filter.

As the sun begins setting in a similar fashion on the drinks industry, expect some big things experientially from well-known brands. Often relying on on-trade spaces as sales promotion channels only, these locations will now form the backbone of brand-building strategies. We should also expect a last minute dash into grey 'open air' areas like sponsorship & digital with the anticipation of continual tweaks to the legislation. In the long run, it appears inevitable though that consumer engagement will happen only in guaranteed over 18 environments; with brand experience the last vestige of communication.

Some might argue that all this is not such a bad thing.

Certainly those from the experiential school of thought would cry the merits of the old Chinese adage of 'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand'. With a chest in, stomach out approach, it will be up to these 'darkened' brands to enhance (legally) consumer experiences in their sacred watering holes and lifestyle spaces.

Lastly, expect the traditional big agency's to jump on the experiential Batmobile bandwagon. With ATL budgets being shifted, a newfound experiential 'passion' will be discovered that of course has nothing to do with lost revenue. Clients should be warned though; taking a knife to a brand experience gunfight can have dire consequences.

ABOUT MIKE SILVER

Mike Silver is the founder of Elevator, a brand experience agency now part of the Smollan Group. Mike has been working in the below-the-line and brand experience arena since 2000. Current clients include Lipton Ice Tea, Old Mutual and Pernod Ricard.

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