

The immersive consumer experience

 By Leigh Andrews

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Brands aren't just relying on traditional advertising and word of mouth to boost brand loyalty - some are taking event activations to the next level by creating beautifully conceptualised spaces as a new touchpoint to enhance consumer experiences in a personal and exclusive way. Here's how Pernod Ricard has done so, while keeping sustainability top of mind.

Some of the highly sensual environments created for recent Pernod Ricard customer experiences include feature pools bathed in blue light, hidden bar alcoves and boat-shaped seating spaces in bars, restaurants and clubs all with a strong element of local design flair. It's no longer just about the product you're selling consumers, it's also about the overall experience.

Take 'Project Knight' as example. An internal code name for the focus on creating great consumer experiences in leading high-end night-time venues in Johannesburg, effectively infusing the Pernod Ricard brands within specially developed and installed spaces in places they frequently visit, rather than just branding an outlet. The spaces had to speak as the brand without having overt logo identifiers, such as the Jameson vintage 'Bicycle Bar' or 'Hell's Kitchen' space in Melville, which went on to be shortlisted as one of the best bar designs at the Restaurant and Bar Design Awards held in London last year...



Wahl, Ingarfield and Du Plessis.

As it's a process that entails being clear on the 'occasion' the brand wants to achieve as well as integrating their ideas with what the owner of the venue wants to achieve in the space, the process of conceptualisation, design and installation can take up to six months. That doesn't mean it's all about excess though. I asked Michael Wahl, trade marketing manager at Pernod Ricard South Africa, as well as Owen Ingarfield, creative director at NightVision Spaces, and Tristan du Plessis, lead designer at StudioA – designers of some of the premium spirit brand's recent 'beautifully designed spaces' – how brands can ensure the consumer experiences they create are sustainable in terms of long-term benefit and that don't have a negative impact on the environment.

Big impact with consumers, little impact on the planet

Wahl explained that everything they do is about enhancing the space and the consumer experience. The spaces are continually updated to ensure that mantra remains true, so it's not a one-off cost but a sustained investment. Ingarfield adds

that the majority of their installations are within an existing built environment, so they're not considered as having a negative impact on the environment. Tying in with the sustained investment angle, the materials used are always of the highest quality to ensure maximum lifespan and durability, and, where possible, LED lighting minimises energy consumption. Du Plessis confirms that most, if not all, furniture and shop-fitted elements are locally sourced, which reduces the total carbon footprint of the project while also benefiting the local SA manufacturing sector – something he's personally passionate about.

Moving on to explain the link between design and branding then, Du Plessis says: “Each brand has a personality, and design is the way in which one can express that personality in a tangible way. Designing space in which the public can experience the brand, and form a personal connection, creates experiential understanding.”

Ingarfield expands on this by explaining that at its core, design is about problem solving – “using a combination of function and form that solves the problem for the user while conveying an aesthetic through its form. Conventionally, branding is a layer above it all that merely 'skins' the form with a particular brand identity. We perceive branding as far more integrated with the design process, digging deeper into the brand DNA to form part of the solution and in turn the form of the design.”



Wahl adds that it's about indulging consumers and drawing them into the world of Pernod Ricard's prestige brands. By creating ambience for enjoying the brand, reflecting the brand intrinsically in a subtle and even subliminal way, through the design and visual identity of the space. He calls it “an immersive fantasy experience” that includes the theatre of a unique serving ritual, staged by their teams of brand ambassadors.

Du Plessis says the magic of creating an immersive consumer experience is that it takes the consumer on a journey into the brand's lifestyle aspirations, thus creating a brand association with the experience. In a nutshell it's the opportunity to give the consumer a taste of the lifestyle your brand is selling.

Ingarfield adds that creating immersive brand experiences means brands get the consumer into their spaces instead of relying on getting into the consumer's media-dominated world as the consumer is in control and able to choose far more selectively exactly what brands he or she is exposed to.

Wahl adds that a 360-degree sales and marketing strategy is needed to engage consumers in this crowded world where brands need to find innovative ways to heighten brand awareness and create visibility 'on the ground' in the spaces their consumers frequently visit in order to engage consumers in the 'last three feet' where they consider buying the spirit brand and at the moment where they take the first sip.

Tips to create a successfully immersive consumer experience

Du Plessis says to ensure you truly understand the personality of the brand and see the design through the perspective of the brand's values. "It's about creating an experiential space instead of just creating a space with a brand aesthetic."

Ingarfield agrees that you need to begin by plunging yourself in the brand identity, history and product. "We ask ourselves questions daily about brands – How do they sound? How do they feel? How do they walk and talk? Far more questions need to be asked about the extrinsic properties of the brand. Our goal is often to use as little traditional branding as possible, but convey the brand through materials, textures and application. Once we've also understood the space in question, we solve the user experience through the lens of 'what the brand would do', creating a branded space as 'human' as possible".



The Jameson Bicycle Bar

Wahl agrees that a deep understanding of the brand and what it intrinsically stands for should be your starting point, as well as clarity on how these can translate into a unique brand experience in a space. Secondly, but most importantly, he says you need to know everything there is to know about your consumer – their habits, what they like, what don't they like – the more specific, the better. A combination of brand and consumer insights allows you to engage with audiences on a rich, personal level. Practical considerations include partnering with leading bars, restaurants and clubs, being clear on what the occasion is that you want to achieve and integrating your ideas with what the owner of the venue wants to achieve in the space.

Lastly, Wahl says “You need design partners with an end-to-end offering that sees projects through from idea conceptualisation to design, production and installation.” After all, it's about indulging consumers and drawing them into the world of your brands.

Keep an eye on the [Pernod Ricard](#), [NightVision Spaces](#) and [StudioA](#) Twitter feeds for more.

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