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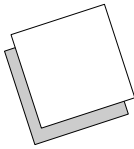
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Consumer experience tourism and brand bonding

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Abstract This paper reviews the growing use of manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers as strategic tools available to strengthen the bond between consumers and brands. Consumer experience tourism provides the user (i.e. the consumer) with an experience regarding a product, its operation, production process, history, and historical significance. Such brand bonding may contribute to higher levels of personal product involvement and brand loyalty. Ultimately, the bond between consumers and brands may be strengthened by the availability of such consumer experiences. The relative importance of these outreach efforts, in addition to their availability, will likely increase as the competition for consumer loyalty intensifies.

Introduction

The relationship marketing orientation has prompted brand managers to seek new and innovative ways of creating long-lasting, mutually-beneficial relationships (or bonds) with a most important asset; namely, their customers. Similarly, the value of well-known and respected brands to their firms is clear (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). The challenge for many brand managers is to increase the bond (even the "covenant" (Chevron, 1998)) between consumer and brand as they seek to influence brand image, brand identity, and brand loyalty.

Increasingly, brand managers are recognizing the opportunity to showcase a product's creation and/or evolution as an important catalyst for forging stronger bonds with consumers. For instance, Celestial Seasonings opened its plant tour and visitors center in 1991. They had 8,000 visitors that first year. By 1995, they hosted over 50,000 guests annually at their facility in Boulder, Colorado. Noted company president Mo Siegel, "One visit has more value than one hundred commercials when guests relate their positive experiences to friends and family" (Brumberg and Axelrod, 1995).

Manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers represent an important part of a firm's integrated marketing communications (IMC) effort. Such efforts seek to affect consumer behaviors by creating a customer-centered synergistic communications program that builds relationships between consumers and brands. An IMC program uses any and all forms of customer contact as an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and to cultivate new ones (Shimp, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the growing use of consumer experience tourism (CET) (manufacturing plant tours, company museums,

An important catalyst for forging stronger bonds with consumers



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The common goal is to establish a bond between consumer and brand

Positive word-of-mouth communication may be more credible than other forms of promotion

and company visitor centers) as a strategic tool to cultivate greater personal involvement with a brand and subsequent brand loyalty. First, the concept of CET is defined and its diversity established. Second, the underlying interest in this type of tourism activity is reviewed. Third, the diversity of target consumers for such tourism sites is analyzed. Fourth, the desired performance outcomes from developing and maintaining such tourism sites are presented. Next, the critical success factors for locating such sites are discussed. Finally, virtual plant tours and their growth in the future are addressed.

Defining consumer experience tourism

Manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers represent a segment of tourism known by different names: manufacturing tourism, industrial attractions, industrial tourism, and industrial heritage tourism. The common goal within each descriptive term is to establish a bond between a consumer and brand as the consumer learns about the brand, its operation, production process, history, and historical significance.

It is suggested here that CET represents a unifying theme for this segment of the tourism industry. This term captures the consumer's ability to discover more about the brands they consume while manufacturers can forge closer relationships with those consumers during the 30-120 minutes of time spent as the facility's guests.

Involvement with a brand

Brand managers seek to address consumer needs at three levels:

- (1) functional (providing solutions to consumer problems);
- (2) symbolic (providing satisfaction of psychological desires); and
- (3) experiential (providing sensory pleasure, variety, and cognitive stimulation) (Park *et al.*, 1986).

CET can strengthen the bond between consumers and brands by providing a visual presentation of the brand, its operation, production process, history, and historical significance. Such a bond may be viewed as an increased level of personal involvement with the brand and (assumedly) translates into greater brand loyalty.

Cognitive involvement reflects a consumer's interest in thinking (or learning more) about a product. CET may increase the consumer's level of cognitive involvement by stimulating thinking about the brand and its production processes. Further, the positive word-of-mouth communication stimulated by satisfied visitors may be deemed more credible than other paid forms of promotion.

Lack of existing direct research attention

To date, CET has received little attention in the marketing literature. Mitchell and Mitchell (2001a) have evaluated the content of such tourism sites. Further, these same authors have evaluated the phenomenon in the food and beverage industries (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2000), the nonprofit sector (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2001b), and the overall economy (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Mitchell and Mitchell (2002) have proposed a format for academics to evaluate local interest in such facilities in their local service areas. The topic is often included briefly in discussions of integrated marketing communications but has received limited direct research attention.

Possible improvements in buyer loyalty

Stores showcase the production process

Diversity of consumer experience tourism

Consumer experience tourism represents a diverse group of tourist attractions. Axelrod and Brumberg (1997) profile over 288 factories throughout the USA that welcome visitors. Similarly, Berger and Berger (1997) provide background information for about 1,000 free industrial tours (in more than 300 industries) that are open to the public. Product categories represented include: processed foods, distilled spirits, clothing, automobiles, television programming and movies, coins, paper products, electronics, furniture, motor homes, toys, sauces and spices, pottery and glassware, financial markets, tires and rubber, golf clubs, baseball bats, and teddy bears. (The American Automobile Association (AAA) includes the category “industrial tours” in its Guidebooks.)

Producers of consumer staples, such as food and beverages, provide a disproportionate number of tours. Of the 288 plant tours covered in Axelrod and Brumberg (1997), 104 (or 36 percent) are food and beverage producers. These non-durable goods are purchased frequently and challenge marketers to create long-term relationships with buyers to ensure market position. Tour providers recognize the possible improvements in buyer loyalty created when a consumer has an enjoyable experience witnessing the production process (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2000).

Arany and Hobson (1998) provide information on smaller, lesser-known museums that are considered part of CET given their focus on a product category or specific brand. Their book depicts available museums including the Mustard Museum, Barbie Hall of Fame, Goodyear World of Rubber collections, Juke Box Museum, and the Liquid Paper Museum.

Currently, there are over 1,500 wineries in the USA (www.tastings.com), most of which provide wine tasting and tours for consumers. This is an additional part of CET for they showcase a winery, its offerings, and its production process. Further, the recent explosion in the number of smaller breweries and brew pubs seeks to capitalize on the consumer’s interest in the manufacturing process and the “chic-ness” of consuming on-the-spot made beverages. There are currently over 1,000 places offering the customer a beer made on the premises (www.allaboutbeer.com). Both wine and beer producers provide experiences applicable to consumers of varying levels of product involvement.

Krispy Kreme Doughnuts produces more than three million doughnuts a day in its 149 stores in 27 states. Each full-service store is specially designed with a glass viewing area to showcase the production process and to provide “a multi-sensory experience for consumers.” Further, the company’s place in history was firmly established with the induction of Krispy Kreme artifacts (including production equipment) in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History (www.krispykreme.com).

It must be noted that liability and security concerns have prompted some firms to re-evaluate their plant tours and to shift them to “more staid and manageable company museums” (Lukas, 1998). Plant tours provide easy targets for industrial espionage. For example, Kellogg Company closed its cereal plants to visitors after discovering rivals taking photos while on a public tour. (They later developed Kellogg’s Cereal City USA in Battle Creek, Missouri.) R.J. Reynolds discontinued popular tours of its cigarette manufacturing plants against the rising tide of anti-smoking sentiment. Steinway and Sons discontinued tours of their piano manufacturing facilities (Lukas, 1998), while Gerber Foods discontinued their plant tours in 1990

A novel and nostalgic view of industrial work

both citing a need for secrecy in the manufacturing process (Vlasic, 1990). Treece (1995), in a commentary piece for *Business Week*, questions the future availability of plant tours for the general public. The commentary warns that more firms will likely replace such tours with “sanitized company museums.”

Underlying interest in consumer experience tourism

Many people think of manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers as low-cost entertainment (and educational) options for parents with children because such tours are typically free or require only a nominal fee (Lukas, 1998). While this is a key target market and a benefit the consumer may seek, the root cause of this fascination runs much deeper.

Harris (1989) and Prentice (1993) point out that factories and mines have historically employed a large percentage of the US workforce. The shift to a service economy takes individuals out of the factories. This removes people spatially and culturally from the manufacturing sector, providing less contact and little first-hand knowledge of industrial work. The plant tour creates a novel and nostalgic view of industrial work, which in turn feeds tourist interest in manufacturing processes. Harris and Prentice further note that many younger workers’ lack of factory work experience progresses naturally toward an increasing curiosity about the topic.

Older employees may relish the experience of “returning to their roots.” Rudd and Davis (1998) identify the industrial revolution as a defining event in US history with company plant tours providing users a look at our collective past. Richards (1996) notes the industrial revolution created an era where the transition from modern to obsolete occurs more rapidly. As such, products of older technology are considered cultural and historical artifacts creating feelings of nostalgia among society. Company museums or visitor centers capitalize on these emotions by providing a sentimental, bonding experience between buyer and brand.

Target consumers for consumer experience tourism

A manufacturer can use its physical facilities to establish (or strengthen) the bond with a variety of parties. The target consumers for CET can be divided into three categories:

- (1) current and potential consumers;
- (2) business partners; and
- (3) community stakeholders.

Bonding with consumers

Manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers have become a low-cost entertainment option for families, community groups, business travelers, and others. They provide a day trip option for local residents. Schools also benefit through field trips for area students and teachers. Business travelers become aware of best practices from firms in both related and unrelated industries (Brumberg and Axelrod, 1995). Prentice (1993) notes that areas with large numbers of business travelers are particularly fertile for the development of such a tourism initiative.

Bonding with business partners

Though business associates are also frequently users of a brand, their interests are typically more professional than personal. Lukas (1998)

Tourism initiative

An effective means of identifying and recruiting future employees

Establish trust and understanding within the supply chain

suggests, “museums create the specter of the *Wizard of Oz*, but factory tours provide a glimpse of the man behind the curtain.” Business relationships enhanced by CET include all corporate stakeholders for example, corporate managers, future employees, new sales agents, industrial suppliers, and shareholders. Plant tours provide corporate managers with an enhanced understanding of how manufacturing capabilities contribute to a company’s strength in the marketplace.

The plant tour may also be an effective means of identifying and recruiting future employees by creating interest in the company’s manufacturing processes (Day, 1990). Upton (1997) suggests that everyone who interacts with a manufacturing plant (i.e. buyers, suppliers, managers, employees, and so on) benefits from a comprehensive look at the manufacturing process.

The Manufacturers’ Agents National Association encourages its members to include plant tours in the orientation processes of new sales agents. Further, they argue that all sales agents, regardless of age or experience, should participate in plant tours to increase product knowledge and build customer rapport. These same sales agents are encouraged to later host such an experience for their industrial buyers (*Agency Sales Magazine*, 1996; *American Salesman*, 1999).

Plant tours can effectively establish trust and understanding within the supply chain. For example, the printing industry benefited from plant tours with publishers (their clients) by demonstrating the realities and limitations of the printing process and industry. Publishers gained a better understanding of their supplier’s processes and were able to work more effectively with them (*Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management*, 1993). Penchina (1993) encourages advertising professionals to tour the manufacturing processes of their clients, particularly employees on the creative side, in order to increase knowledge of the client’s products, processes, culture, and consumers. Media buyers become better informed about the media production processes by witnessing these activities first-hand (*American Printer*, 1997).

Bonding with community stakeholders

Plant tours have been a staple part of the chemical industry’s responsible care program. This program educates community residents about the chemical plant’s environmental management systems. School presentations demonstrate the connection between chemical plants, their products, and the final goods used by consumers. Plant tours also seek to stimulate student interest in the sciences (Stringer and Walsh, 1996).

Plant tours may be an effective means of communicating with regulatory agencies and/or public interest groups. For instance, Nike commissioned a panel to review its operations in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam to counter perceptions of unfair labor practices and working conditions. The review process included on-site plant tours and visits with local employees. The company received a favorable review with respect to this volatile public relations issue (Neuborne, 1997).

Conducting tours of new facilities during grand openings is commonly practiced, with target consumers including shareholders, politicians, dignitaries and reporters. For example, Russell Stover Candies welcomed such guests during the opening of their new 452,000 square foot confectionery plant in Corsica, Texas in April 1999 (*Candy Industry*, 1999). While target audiences may have individual motivations for taking such a

tour and may seek different outcomes from it, it is certain that people are interested in the work of others.

Desired outcomes from consumer experience tourism

Consumer experience tourism provides the user (i.e. the consumer) with an experience regarding a product, its operation, production process, history, and historical significance. This represents the desired outcome of relationship marketing; that is, consumers increase their knowledge of (and establish closer bonds) with both familiar and not-so-familiar brands. This heightened level of product knowledge may contribute to a heightened level of personal product involvement (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2000).

Involvement theory

Involvement theory suggests that consumers who have witnessed a product's production may become more brand loyal as a result of their identification with the product, their familiarity with the production process, their first-hand interaction with employees, first-hand witness to their quality assurance processes, and other internal needs. As such, business outcomes such as growth in buyer loyalty, sales, profitability, and market share are some of the outcomes sought by companies that provide manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers. It would be myopic, however, to suggest that CET is solely driven by the desire to increase sales, profitability, or market share. Other outcomes sought focus on company image, education, open communication, and stability.

The opportunity to build a relationship with local residents

Company image

Plant tours provide firms with the opportunity to build a relationship with local residents. This can be particularly important if the product or production processes are perceived to pose environmental concerns. For example, the Bingham Canyon Copper Mine in Utah hosts more than 160,000 guests per year. The mining company can demonstrate its commitment to the environment as well as its dedication to providing stable employment for local residents (Rudd and Davis, 1998). It has been argued that such company exhibits allow a firm to "renegotiate its relationship with the environment" by focusing on the positive aspects of its operation while downplaying the negatives (see Short *et al.*, 1993; Edwards and Llurdes, 1996; McBoyle, 1996; Richards, 1996).

A multi-sense experience for stakeholders

Education

Plant tours provide a multi-sense experience for consumers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Consumers can bond with brands. Company employees can visualize the larger manufacturing process and appreciate the contribution their particular function or sub-routine makes to the finished good. Salespeople, as well as external sales agents, can study the manufacturing processes to be better prepared to answer (and anticipate) buyer questions. Shareholders can witness the processes used by firms in which they have an equity position. Finally, some academic and professional associations include plant tours on their meeting agendas for continuing education.

Open communication

An open manufacturing process conveys to others an open communication style of an organization (i.e. we have got nothing to hide). Positive word-of-mouth communication is stimulated among satisfied on-lookers. News media may provide "free press" given the novelty of the open approach to manufacturing. While some argue the opportunity for "true" benchmarking

Three key ingredients

may be overstated, one key outcome of industrial tourism programs for managers is the openness of communication and the ability to learn from others (Hinton, 1996).

Stability

Revenues from CET operations can be used to offset decreases in operating revenue, retain full employment for local workers, or to stimulate the local economy. This is particularly important in an industry that has witnessed a dramatic shift in demand, such as mining, where the interest in the processes used remains high (Edwards and Lurdes, 1996). Creating industrial heritage museums and tours allows management to reclaim jobs and to improve declining profits (Harris, 1989; Prentice, 1993). Further, such revenues can be used to offset the costs associated with increasing government intervention (Roehl *et al.*, 1993).

Locating consumer experience tourism facilities

The geographic location of a CET attraction can greatly influence its relative success. Mansfield (1992) suggests three key ingredients for industrial heritage sites that are applicable for all CET sites:

- (1) The region is experiencing positive economic growth.
- (2) The region has well-developed transportation systems.
- (3) The region has existing hospitality accommodations.

Each is discussed in the sections that follow.

First, the operating area should offer existing tourism offerings and be experiencing positive economic growth. In essence, activity feeds off other activity. General Motors successfully opened its Test Track Ride and Exhibit in Disney's EPCOT Center (Orlando, Florida) in 1997. This facility allows parents and children alike to test new automotive concepts as a part of their Disney experience (Halliday, 1997).

Las Vegas, Nevada, with its 30 million tourists annually, boasts the company visitor centers/museums World of Coke and M&M's World as well as plant tours at Ocean Spray Cranberry World and Ethel M. Chocolates (www.lasvegas24hours.com). Such unusual promotional efforts may be more expensive than traditional mass media but provide a higher likelihood of increasing brand awareness (Halliday, 1997).

Next, the area should provide well-structured transportation systems to move visitors easily to the sites. Visitors to Washington, DC can go to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing using the area's mass transit system, as can visitors to CNN's studio tours in Atlanta, Georgia. Standard road signage can also be beneficial. States such as California and Virginia have adopted standard symbols and road signage to direct wine travelers to their many wineries.

Finally, the area should possess existing hospitality accommodations to satisfy the food and lodging needs of travelers. CET tends to be something done as part of a day's activities and not the focal point of the day's activities. So, a traveler to Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia) and nearby King's Dominion amusement park can also visit area CET sites: Candle Factory; Williamsburg Doll Factory; Williamsburg Pottery Factory; Williamsburg Winery; and others. The hospitality infrastructure already exists for the many families that visit the area.

Cultivating long-term relationships

A bonding experience

Consistent with the shorter time investment needed for CET, areas with large numbers of business travelers are especially fruitful for this type of tourism initiative (Prentice, 1993). So, a business traveler to Louisville, Kentucky can mix in excursions to the Louisville Slugger Plant Tour/Museum, Louisville Stoneware, Heaven Hill Distillery, or the Colonel Harland Sanders Museum between business appointments.

Virtual plant tours

Many firms have elected to showcase their CET sites over the World Wide Web. Hershey Foods, for example, provides a live tour of their popular Hershey, Pennsylvania chocolate factory as well as a virtual tour from their company's Web site (www.hersheys.com). (Hershey Foods has successfully created a chocolate-themed amusement park at its Hershey, Pennsylvania facility.)

Researchers at Bradley University (<http://bradley.bradley.edu/~rf/plantour.htm>) have identified a variety of virtual plant tours available over the Internet. Another Web site (www.virtualfreesites.com) provides links to more than 300 virtual tours of museums, exhibits, and points of special interest. Further, the site provides virtual tours of the branches of US Government (i.e. how the government works). Visitors to these virtual tours can bypass standing in line, feeling rushed during their visit, and can return as often as they like.

A current proposal from General Motors demonstrates the importance of cultivating long-term relationships between clients and the brands they consume. General Motors plans to put Web-accessible cameras in its factories enabling buyers to observe the assembling of their vehicles via the Internet. The consumer receives an e-mail specifying the time and date for visiting the Web site to:

- (1) view the car exiting the paint shop;
- (2) observe the interior installation;
- (3) witness the final assembly process; and
- (4) see the car driven off the production line.

GM's program is designed to reduce vehicle delivery time to about ten days from the current 60-70 days and to enhance the consumer's excitement about the impending vehicle delivery (Eldridge, 2000).

Summary statements

Consumer experience tourism provides the consumer with a bonding experience regarding a brand, its operation, production process, history, and historical significance. A consumer witnessing the production of their favorite brands may become a more brand loyal user as their level of involvement with the brand intensifies. Such an experience may increase the buyer's cognitive involvement with the brand while addressing the buyer's need for experiential learning. Further, the aura of the manufacturing process or historical evolution of the brand may become an integral part of the brand's image. Finally, this same tourist may become a credible spokesperson for the firm as he/she shares the excitement of their experience with others. Toward this end, CET can become an integral part of a firm's integrated marketing communications program.

As the US economy continues its progression from a manufacturing-driven economy to one driven by services and information, the interest in "how

things work” or “how did they make that” intensifies. Indeed, many members of society have been separated from the manufacturing process. This separation of people and process feeds the growing interest in CET. Further, citizens studying current processes used to produce familiar brands can celebrate the industrial heritage of their nation. Ultimately, the bond between consumers and brands may be strengthened by the availability of manufacturing plant tours, company museums, and company visitor centers. The relative importance of these outreach efforts, in addition to their availability, will likely increase as the competition for consumer loyalty intensifies.

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