

SPECIAL EVENTS AS COMMUNICATION TOOL TO CREATE BRAND EXPERIENCE: THAI CASE STUDIES*

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Abstract

Special Events industry has been on the rise as it can be seen from the expenditure in special events and event marketing industry around the globe in recent years. For example, PQ Media (cited in Miller and Washington, 2012, p. 427) predicted that expenditure in event marketing in the States in 2012 could reach 37 billion USD. Further, in Thailand, it was anticipated that revenue for event industry in 2010 could earn up to 370 million USD with the growth of 15 percent in 2011 (Posttoday, 2010). Nowadays, corporations, both profit and non-profit, apply special events as their communication tools to connect with their target audiences due to the change of consumer behaviour. Consumers avoid advertisements or other above-the-line communication tools. Therefore, special events become one of the most effective below-the-line tools to reach consumers for the reason that special events and event marketing provide higher ROI than any other communication tools (Close et al., 2006 cited in Dahlen, Lange and Smith, 2010). The upsurge of special events reflects Schmitt's (1999a, 1999b) experiential marketing concept. He contends that the marketing sphere moves from traditional marketing, focused on feature and benefits of products, to experiential marketing. Further, in experiential marketing, brand should relate with consumers through sensory, affective and cognitive dimension leading to unforgettable brand experience (ibid). Schmitt (1999a, 1999b) proposes 'Strategic Experiential Model (SEMs) saying that experience can be created via five types: sense, feel, think, act and relate. This paper therefore explores the practice of special events as a communication tool in creating brand experience among the business corporations in Thailand. Data was derived from six in-depth interviews with practitioners in corporate communication and event organisers, as well as observations in eleven created special events of business corporations and the observation as participant in a medium-size event organiser by the researcher. Data was collected between October 2012 and January 2013. It is found that special events are adopted as a tool to communicate with corporations' target audiences as it offered first-hand experience to audiences as well as interaction between corporations and their audiences. Special events were considered as one of the corporation's touch points to allow audience to sense, feel, think, act and relate with corporation and its brand. The study showed that special events created physical experience for target audience once they join or participate in the special events. Further, sensory and affective experiences were created through several activities offered in the special events including product testing, participation in games or activities, venue decoration, and participation of celebrities. Further, special events created cognitive experience through provision of information in the events. Last but not least, the participation in special events helped target audiences to be able to relate themselves with their ideal selves or their reference groups. This paper demonstrates that special events are popular communication tools among Thai business corporations, for the time being, as they create holistic brand experience for target audience. In the circumstance that consumers in general avoid other types of communication from corporations especially advertisements, special events however can bring brand into audience's daily life, and sometimes draw audiences to participate with brand. Experience during and from event participation can bring about the memorable brand experience, leading to brand image, brand relationship and eventually brand loyalty as contended by Dahlen et.al. (2010, p. 418), Wood (2009, p 253) and Kanjanapokin (2012, p. 52-55).

Keywords: Special Events, Experiential Brand, Communication Tool, Thailand

Introduction

Special events and event marketing industries continually receive much attention from marketing communication and corporate communication professionals around the globe. For example, in the United States, IBISWorld (2012) estimates that trade show and event planning service industries earn 13 million US dollars in 2012. Further, PQ Media (2012 cited in Miller and Washington, 2012, p. 427) assess that annual spending for event

marketing can reach 37 billion US dollars. This figure excludes spending on sponsorships of third-party events and trade shows.

In United Kingdom, the research done by Eventia (cited in Hall, 2012) confirmed the significance of event industry reflecting from the increase of corporate events from 47 per cent in 2009 to 57 per cent in 2011.

Moreover, in Thailand, it was anticipated that revenue for event industry in 2010 could earn up to 370 million USD with the growth of 15 percent in 2011 (Posttoday, 2010). Nowadays, corporations, both profit and nonprofit, apply special events as their communication tools to connect with their target audiences through various activities, for example product launches, conferences, seminars, trade shows, festivals or sport events.

The importance of special events as communication tools reflects the change in consumer behaviour at present. Consumers avoid advertisements or other above-the-line communication tools. Therefore, special events become one of the most effective below-the-line tools to reach consumers for the reason that special events and event marketing provide higher ROI than any other communication tools (Close et al., 2006 cited in Dahlen, Lange and Smith, 2010). Preston (2012, p. 4) claims that special events become “friend” of brand communicators as they can directly communicate brand to organisations’ target audiences.

The upsurge of special events reflects Schmitt’s (1999a, 1999b) experiential marketing concept. He contends that the marketing sphere moves from traditional marketing, focused on feature and benefits of products, to experiential marketing which its ultimate goal of marketing is to provide customers with valuable experiences (1999a, p. 60). Further, in experiential marketing, brand should relate with consumers through sensory, affective and cognitive dimension leading to unforgettable brand experience (1999a, 1999b). Schmitt (ibid) proposes ‘Strategic Experiential Model (SEMs) saying that experience can be created via five types: sense, feel, think, act and relate. This paper therefore explores the practice of special events as a communication tool in creating brand experience among the business corporations in Thailand.

Research Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research approach. The Grounded Theory was applied as a main research methodology. Data was derived from three different data collection methods as follows:

1. Observation as complete observer: the researcher observed eleven created special events of business corporations in Bangkok, Thailand to understand the patterns and formats of special events.
2. Observation as observer-as-participant: the researcher temporarily worked in creative team with a middle-sized event organiser in Bangkok in order to get insights on thinking and behaviour of practitioners in the event industry.
3. In-depth interviews: the research interviewed six practitioners in event and marketing communications industries in order to fully understand the event industry from the viewpoints of event practitioners and clients.

Data from three methods, collected between October 2012 and January 2013, was triangulated to help understanding of the research findings and to allow the researcher to critically analyse and discuss critical analysis and discussion of the research findings.

Research Findings

It is found that special events are adopted as a tool to communicate with corporations’ target audiences due to its special characteristics. Special events offer two-way communication with audiences and first-hand experience to audiences as well as interaction between corporations and their audiences (Chatratchart, 2013). Special events, additionally, are considered as one of the corporation’s touch points to allow audience to sense, feel, think, act and relate with corporation and its brand.

According to Schmitt’s (1999a, 1999b) ‘Strategic Experiential Model’ (SEMs), special events create brand experience to target audiences or event participants through SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE as follows.

SENSE and FEEL

Chatratchart (2013) reveals that special events can bring about sensory and affective experiences via five senses – sight, sound, scent, taste and touch – through various activities offered in special events including:

- Product testing

This is the easiest and most popular activity to create sensory and affective experiences for event participants as they directly receive first-hand experience through testing products. Product testing will be more effective in media events such as press launches. Once the press gains direct experiences with the product, service or brand, they are likely to communicate their feelings to wider audiences through the media outlets which are the free publicity – the most desirable tools in public relations.

- Participation in games or activities

Game booths available in special events provide entertainment to event participants, leading to the impression on brand and brand image eventually. For example, in the product launch of one international credit card targeting the frequent travellers, the event set up four game booths under the theme of tourist destinations and seasons to reflect the lifestyle of the target audiences. Event participants were distributed 'passport' for collecting points once they participated in each booth. Those points could be converted or exchanged to points for participants' credit cards. Joining in game booths creates fun through sight, sound, and touch among event participants.

- Venue decoration

Decoration in special events is the fundamental way to create sensory experience for event participants. The participants see decoration (sight), hear music (sound), smell and taste of food (scent and taste), as well as feel products or decorations (touch) in special events. For example, the special event on Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign of one cosmetic company was decorated in pink including stage backdrop, seating, lighting, and food to provide total experience of pink ribbon – the symbol of the campaign.

- Participation of celebrities

This is one of the most popular tactics adopted by business corporations in Thailand. The attendance of celebrities in special events creates the perception of brand among event participants. It further shows that those celebrities accept in products, services, or corporations organised the events. The participation of celebrities in special events therefore communicate brand image effectively. For instance, in the thank-you party of an international soft drink targeting young people, the celebrities joining events included up and coming pop stars and very famous band showing in the event. Those movie stars and musicians reflect the 'new generation' look of the soft drink in the eyes of event participants.

THINK

According to Schmitt (1999a, 1999b), experiential marketing should encourage participants to engage in elaborative and creative thinking. Therefore, special events provide cognitive or problem-solving experiences through provision of information in the events. Apart from information related to products/service or corporations provided in the scripts of Master of Ceremony, there are four common ways adopted by Thai business corporations as found in Chatratchart's (2013) study. Details are as follows.

- Press conference

Press conference is the most obvious mean to provide information for event participants especially the press. It offers the opportunity for corporation's executives to talk in details about the new product, service, or initiative to the press and wider audience. Information provided in the press conference can encourage event participants to exercise their cognitive thinking and interact with the company executives once they have any queries on the topic discussed in the events.

- Press kit

It is common in the press launch events to distribute press kit to the press. Press kit always include press release, fact sheet of new product/service or project, as well as resume of corporation's executives. Press release is the center piece of information for the event as the press can use it to communicate to wider target audience of corporations through news in media outlets. Therefore, press kits not only communicate brand experience and encourage thinking process among the press as the event participants, but also offer cognitive experience to wider audience once they read news about those special events.

- Exhibitions or information booths

Exhibitions and booths with staffs provided information for event participants are widely used among Thai business corporations. With the technological advanced, the exhibition can be interactive to attract participants, for example, the use of touch screen computer to provide information of the event and corporation. Staffs at booths further generate conversations with participants and stimulate their thinking process as well. The dialogue with corporation's staff and impression with exhibition can lead to the impression of brand which is the part of brand experiential.

- Exclusive interviews

After the press conference, corporation's executives normally will be available for interviews with the press, or dialogues with event participants. Definitely, conversation between executives and event participants brings about the understanding and knowledge of topic presenting in special events. The conversation moreover can create or reinforce brand image of corporations as those conversations reflect the credibility and intelligence of executives leading to the perception towards executives and corporations they work with.

ACT

According to Schmitt's SEMs (1999a), ACT marketing enriches customer's lives by enhancing their physical experiences, showing alternative ways of doing things, alternative lifestyles, and interactions (p. 68). Therefore, special events provide physical interactions between brand and event participations through activities in the events, for example, game booths, photo booths, concerts or fashion shows (Chatratichart, 2013).

Further, physical experiences may include the sales and promotion in special events. Basically, special events should support organisations' marketing strategies. Special events, not only draw attention of target audiences to join the events, but also encourage participants to get involved in sales activities, or at least to be aware of sales initiatives and readily to take actions in the future. For example, in the product launch of new debit card of one commercial bank, the event encouraged event participants to apply for the new debit card immediately in the event. Additionally, in the launch of new credit card, the participants were distributed a card to collect points from joining four booth games in the event. Later, the participants could turn points in their passports to be points in their credit card. These are examples found in special events of Thai business corporations that tried to communicate their brands through physical experience created in special events.

RELATE

RELATE marketing contains aspects of SENSE, FEEL, THINK and ACT. It expands beyond the individual's private feeling, but relating the individual to his or her ideal self, other people, or cultures (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 68). As found in Chatratichart (2013), special events help target audience, or event participants, relate themselves with their ideal selves or their reference groups through guest lists, celebrities who join events, as well as choices of location, food and performance in order to establish strong brand relations and brand communities.

The guest lists and choice of celebrities to be invited in special events are the most obvious tactics adopted by Thai business corporations. The popularity of celebrities attracts target audiences, as well as the press, to join special events. Also, choice of celebrities helps create perceived brand image among target audience. The event participants are likely to relate themselves with those celebrities and other guests in the special events, and with the organisation's brand eventually.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that special event is one of the most popular communication tools among Thai business corporations, for the time being, as they create holistic brand experience for target audience. In the circumstance that consumers in general avoid other types of communication from corporations especially advertisements, special event however can bring brand into audience's daily life, and sometimes draw audiences to participate with brand. Obviously, special event is experience provider. It offers two-way communication with audiences and first-hand experience to audiences as well as interaction between corporations and their audiences. Special events, additionally, are considered as one of the corporation's touch points to allow audience to sense, feel, think, act and relate with corporation and its brand according to Strategic Experiential Model (Schmitt, 1999a; 1999b). Eventually, experiences during and from event participations can bring about the memorable brand experience, leading to brand image, brand relationship and ultimately brand loyalty as contended by Dahlen et.al. (2010, p. 418), Wood (2009, p 253) and Kanjanapokin (2012, p. 52-55).

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Author's biography

Waraporn Chatratchart received her first degree in public relations from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and a master degree in communication from Queensland University of Technology, Australia. After working for 8 years in both PR industry and academic, she continued her doctoral study and awarded the PhD in 2010 from the Media School, Bournemouth University, England. She is now working for the School of Communication Arts, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok, Thailand. Her latest research project was "Special Events for Brand Communication of Business Corporations in Thailand". However, her research interests extend to corporate communications, political marketing, campaigning, and image management. She can be reached at waraporn_cha@utcc.ac.th.