

# Creating a platform for dialogue

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Direct marketing through brand activation has gained a great deal of traction in the eyes of marketers, as well as the ever evolving South African consumer in recent years. With the abundance of one-way communication, through the cluttered media of television, radio and print media, brands require effective ways to extend and cement their share-of-mind, as well as a share-of-pocket with consumers.

This is best done by building a closer relationship with consumers by providing them with 'touch points' where they can interact and experience a brand, outside of traditional mass branding campaigns. "Activation media is about creating an experiential marketing interaction between the brand and the consumer and marketers are fast realising the value of communicating with their desired target markets through this alternative marketing platform," comments Vaughan Berry, Director and Head of Provantage Media's activation division. "A connection needs to be made with the consumer that extends past the simplified messages inherent in above-the-line communication mediums today. These connections can best be made at the 'touch points' offered through activation marketing."

According to Berry, activation marketing is becoming increasingly popular as part of a company's marketing mix strategy due to a number of factors, which include the fragmentation of traditional media, the changing lifestyles of consumers, the increasingly competitive South African retail environment and the fact that consumer trust is built when they can experience the brand first hand and link an already established brand identity with a tangible product.

"Effective brand activation is built on sound consumer and product insights and the creation of a creative, strategic platform that attracts the attention of your target market and allows the consumer to engage with your brand," says Berry. "During this customer contact it is essential that the activation campaign is executed by marketers who understand their target market and who can effectively extend a brand past traditional advertising. Bringing the brand to life in the mind of the consumer will only work if there is consistency with the brand image and if the quality of the communication platform and message is in-line with established brand values and identity."

The success of the activation campaign therefore hinges on the knowledge and insight held by the marketer or the brand manager with regard to their target market, and their ability to translate that knowledge into an impactful communication platform. "This transfer of knowledge needs to be done properly, from the briefing process through to the selection and training of all promotional teams," continues Berry. "The promotional staff become your link to your target market, and if they are not well trained, credible, presentable and able to communicate with a consumer then you lose the opportunity to connect with your target market on a meaningful level."

Creating two-way communication between a brand and a consumer is the focus of any brand activation campaign. These interactions should lead to relationships being built, which is an opportunity to build or reinforce a sustainable brand image and ultimately effect buying patterns. "The key to this communication is the use of well researched and targeted messaging, as the broad stroke approach to mass marketing is often lost on the diverse cultures and languages present in South Africa. This messaging can only be effectively created through the thorough understanding of the target market and product," states Berry.

The location of the brand activation and the creative ideas are also key factors to ensure successful brand activation. "There are numerous channels that can be used today to reach the consumer, outside of the traditional in-store and mall activation," continues Berry. "Consumers need to be reached in innovative ways, in settings that they would not usually be communicated to. Using non-traditional settings to create novel customer interactions has become the key to attracting the attention of South African consumers."

The informal retail sector in South Africa has also influenced the type of direct marketing tools that are used to reach this market. Brand vans provide a highly focused and visible sales and distribution resource that can effectively reach a pre-defined consumer base, within any geographical area. Other new innovative activation techniques include task force teams that handle any non-traditional activation campaign and youth activations, such as in-school and campus activations.

“Today there are limitless channels a brand can use in order to reach our fragmented consumer bases, in both innovative and relevant ways. However, companies need to realise that activation media needs to build relationships with their target market, by offering value and creating brand awareness through direct interactions that are both meaningful and relevant,” concludes Berry.

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