

Getting hands-on with customers

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Lara Sinclair | *August 27, 2007*

MARKETERS are channelling an increasing proportion of their budget into "experiential" marketing, or events that create a deep connection with a relatively small number of people, but which can then be leveraged either through word-of-mouth or the media, to reach a wider audience.

Vodka brand Smirnoff recently spent \$1.5 million on an exclusive annual music event held at a secret location in Sydney aimed at persuading trendsetters to trial its ready-to-drink products.

A warehouse was transformed into a dance music venue for a night, and 1500 guests were treated to a line-up that included The Cuban Brothers and Sneaky Sound System.

National Australia Bank is focusing a growing proportion of its energy on sponsorships -- such as its relationship with AFL children's competition Auskick and the rookie Rising Star contest -- which are then leveraged through related events and the media.

Head of strategy and marketing Greg Sutherland says local events, such as Saturday morning Auskick rounds that can be attended by branch staff and help build relationships with the community, are increasingly important to the bank.

The message the bank wants to convey to customers is that NAB is "here to help them enjoy (a) more satisfying, more rewarding and more successful 'big life'," Sutherland says.

NAB's agency, Clemenger Melbourne, has created a catchy TV commercial, to the tune of Gimme Dat Ding showing youngsters' form with the football. That relationship is now also being leveraged online, with big and little kids able to post video of themselves marking and kicking the ball on the NAB website, creating a continuous line of people kicking the ball to each other.

Meanwhile, Melbourne casino complex Crown is believed to be considering a television spin-off of its Rock Star Karaoke event, held earlier this year.

The initiative, which combined elements of reality programming with live music, a radio hook-up and internet media, gave aspiring singers the chance to take to the stage and sing with a high-profile live band.

It was developed by STW Group's brand entertainment arm Brand New Alliance to help market the Crown complex as a venue for live music through its high-tech LIVE stage, which opened in December.

"(It) allows patrons the chance to be a real rockstar for a night, backed by a high-profile live band," Brand New Alliance chief executive Georgie Summerhayes said in an interview with The Australian earlier this year.

Contestants were able to see and hear their performance on multiple platforms including social networking website MySpace.com.au and Melbourne radio station Fox FM.

Describing the launch earlier this year, Ms Summerhayes said the project was an example of "brand entertainment", rather than advertiser-funded content.

"The point of entry is identifying the real passion area of your consumer, then (determining) what's being under-served and how we can create it," she said.

"You've got to get people to choose your entertainment (ahead of other options)," she said. "It's all about affinity."

The experiential marketing industry is burgeoning, according to Lindy Andrews, a director of BizParade, an events industry digital magazine and directory launched earlier this month.

"In 2003 (Australian businesses) ran more than 300,000 events, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics," Ms Andrews said. "More than \$20 billion was spent.

"That is increasing. Traditional marketing ... is being diverted into events.

"Some businesses that may have spent 20 per cent of their budget on events (are) now pushing 70 per cent."

Coca-Cola, which has spent three years building up its Live'N Local concert series, this year launched a spin-off TV show on the Seven Network called Live'N Local Up Close.

XXXX Gold's beach cricket event that launched last summer was shown on the Ten Network.

But according to Ms Andrews, one of the most innovative global examples of event marketing happened last year in New York, where cat food brand Meow Mix created a feline Big Brother called Meow Mix House.

Ten stray cats were housed in a Fifth Avenue shopfront and their antics streamed online and shown later on pay-TV.

Viewers were able to vote for their favourite cat, with nine progressively adopted out and the last cat standing given the job of Meow Mix's cat food taster.