



Picture: Beth 2012

How interactive brands stand out from the crowd

Innovative brands are taking advantage of technology to make their mark at trade shows by turning their stands into interactive spaces that create high levels of engagement.

By Lucy Fisher

The days when audiences were largely content to walk around trade and consumer shows collecting leaflets and business cards are over, say event organisers. Advances in technology and increases in ticket prices have led to higher expectations on the part of consumers, which has enabled innovative brands to stand out from the crowd.

When Luke Collings, event director of the Cake & Bake Show, set out to create a new event celebrating the popularity of baking, he admits he was lucky in terms of timing. But it's not luck that has made the new show a sell-out, it is because it allows visitors to get involved with the exhibitions, he claims.

The Cake & Bake Show is designed to be interactive, with classes covering baking techniques together with competitions, demonstrations and tutorials.

Collings says he was inspired by Golf Live – an event that he enjoyed because it offered

interactive elements, such as the opportunity to try out clubs, have a lesson with a pro and take part in a Q&A with golfing greats.

Not only did Collings spot the growing popularity of baking among quite a diverse demographic, he also understood the importance of engagement at trade and consumer exhibitions. As a result, he decided to work closely with clients on stand design. "I wanted to make the Cake & Bake Show experiential," he explains. "We've now sold out and we're seeking additional hours at the venue in the evening."

This is one of the reasons that Mark Brown, marketing manager for baking at General Mills, is using Cake & Bake to help relaunch the Betty Crocker brand. "This is the first trade or consumer event of any decent scale for us in the UK," he says. "It's about making baking accessible, giving visitors the confidence to do it in public. Putting ovens on stands and providing expertise is expensive, but I think any event's main hook has to be entertainment."

Suzanne Borrell, communications director of What's on 4 – the organiser of BabyExpo which has been running since 2007 – says that the need to engage the audience quickly was one of the first key lessons for her as an event organiser. "We learned quite swiftly that you need to offer short, sharp demos and break up seminars with something fun," she says.

There is a large stage area at the BabyExpo and free demo slots are offered to exhibitors as a way of attracting visitors. But Borrell admits there have been instances when an individual tries to sell products on stage rather than providing something that people really want to engage in. "It can be acutely embarrassing," she says. "It can't be a series of ads."

Karen McKenzie, a franchisee of Gymboree, a children's activity class and entertainment provider, says the benefits of face-to-face meetings at events and the opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of what Gymboree offers is very valuable. "Our product is about ►

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When Auto Trader sponsored the Goodwood Moving Motor Show, it created three interactive stands that were designed to raise brand awareness and allow visitors to engage with the title. The first stage of the activity centred on the official Goodwood mobile app that Auto Trader devised. At the heart of the app was an augmented reality game that allowed visitors to take part in a virtual race round the circuit, with the prize of a new car on offer for the winning entry.

At the second stand, visitors could have their photo taken and imposed on an image of their dream car. These images could be printed out and uploaded onto Facebook. The third stand housed model cars that visitors could pick up and swipe on a large touchscreen in order to find out more about that particular model.

"My chief executive was unsure initially about adults being interested in model cars but the stand was rammed," says Jonathan Williams, Auto Trader's group consumer marketing director. "There's something

nostalgic about them. And it was what I call 'living room interactive', as opposed to one-on-one engagement involving people playing with their phones. Decisions about cars are often family oriented."

Williams stresses the need to be brave at events and says that individuals can become brand advocates for life after thorough engagement, although he suggests that Auto Trader would be more likely to focus on one technology next time rather than the delivery of three different types, which adds levels of complexity.

"People that came to our stand were amazed," he claims. "It's part of our brand strategy to show how innovative we are. But I wouldn't want to deliver

a greater depth of technology even if our budget was endless.

"That would mean your cost per engagement would rise and ultimately you'd be eroding your returns."



BabyExpo: The opportunity for parents to see their child delight in a toy can convert into sales

▷ helping babies and young children become more confident," she says.

At BabyExpo, Gymboree will be running a play area with 'parachute time' for children and Borrell says that the opportunity for parents to see their child delight in a toy or to hear about its educational benefits often converts into sales.

David Langrish, head of marketing, technology

"The interactive element is critical. You have to be prepared to show how your product works. And it has to be live."

David Langrish, i2i

and learning divisions at Cannes Lions organiser i2i, adds: "The interactive element is critical. You have to be prepared to show how your product works. And it has to be live as opposed to scrolling through screen shots."

Paul Grant, managing director of PSP Publishing, which owns the Girls' Day Out and Scottish Golf Show brands, agrees. "You need to create a positive vibe," he says. "There will be a large stage for fashion shows at Girls' Day Out. It's the demonstrations and the things that people don't expect that they talk about, such as the Botox demonstrations and model searches."

Social media is also now a key vehicle to connect with consumers and get them talking about a show before, during and after the event. "We run a competition to win an opportunity to blog at The Look Show," says Tara Steadman, senior marketing manager at Look magazine. "This is always really popular."

The Look Show is sponsored by Smashbox Cosmetics this year and at the centre of this partnership will be a virtual shopping wall where consumers can purchase products using an augmented reality phone app from Blippar.

Stephen Shaw, opportunities director at the image recognition platform provider, says: "You'll be able to use Blippar to find out more, watch 'how to apply' videos, find your nearest stockist or to buy on the day. Rather than just having brochures or static images on a wall, the use of technology along with elements like the fashion shows and the makeovers all help to amplify the message."

He adds that when Blippar was chosen by UK

Trade & Investment to exhibit at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas as an example of what British start-ups can achieve, they opted to hand out iPads that allowed visitors to interact with the technology for themselves. "It's about showbiz," he says. "We only had a small stand but we were rammed."

Interactivity does not need to involve technology to have impact. "Sometimes interactive elements become over-complex or over-engineered," says Borrell at BabyExpo. "It may be that an exhibitor spends too much on the stand. Baby shows need to be fun and approachable and often stickers and balloons are all you need."

And brands must think beyond just trying to sell their own product. When yoghurt brand Activia had a stand at the Vitality Show, organised by Vos Media, it put together an advice clinic talking about nutrition.

"It was a one-to-one session offering advice about health and nutrition. This had little to do with yoghurt but it was an opportunity for visitors to talk in confidence with an expert," says Damian Norman, managing director at Vos Media. The stand always had a long queue and had to bring in more staff for consultations, he claims.

Yet no matter how much theatre, personalisation and automation show organisers can achieve, it is the human element that lies at the core of any successful event. Without approachable and well-trained staff at your stand, your augmented reality app, RFID wristband and smart data capture are unlikely to represent a good investment. ●