

Marketing is context

By Niraj Dawar

In 2007 The Washington Post carried an astonishing article describing a social experiment the newspaper had conducted. The Post had asked Joshua Bell to play in the Washington metro during the morning rush hour. As the newspaper describes it, “No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the Metro in an indoor arcade at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made....in a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?”

Three days before the metro performance, Joshua Bell played to a full Symphony Hall in Boston at \$100 a seat.

The difference between the performance three days earlier and the metro performance was context. The audience members in Boston were self-selected, eager, and salivating. Those in the metro had other things on their mind. A superlative product in the right context is breathtaking. The same product in a banal context is, as in the video, not even given a chance by our senses – they just blot it out.

So what is context? And how do marketers create it?

Ask a marketer what business she is in, and she’ll likely tell you about the product she sells. Ask a marketer what is the moment of truth in his business, and he’ll probably tell you it’s when the consumer decides to buy or not buy the product. The product and the transaction reign supreme. Neither heeds the context.

Context begins long before the purchase transaction, and is about so much more than the product. Context is about targeting the right audience, and about preparing that audience to savor the product. Context is buzz, context is what other consumers say about the product; Context is about ensuring the product is seen in the best possible light, and consumed in the best possible complementary setting.

Brands spend a fortune on flagship stores to create the right context for the products; a context that, unlike third-party retailers, is purpose built to showcase the brand, and that the brand controls completely.

But ultimately, where does context reside? In the mind of the customer. By creating context, marketers play with the customers' mind. They shape it to create the most receptive setting for the brand and the product. Context carries a significant price premium. That price premium is the brand's return on investments in context.

Steve Jobs was a grand master of context. From the Apple stores to his magical Apple product launches, context ruled. Apple does not even participate in the largest consumer electronics trade show (CES) where most other consumer electronics companies showcase the new products they're launching — the context isn't right. So will new product launches from Apple be able to create the right context for the product in the absence of Steve Jobs? We're about to find out on March 7th, at the launch of the next iPad. The internet is already buzzing, bloggers are salivating, and user anticipation is high. How's that for context?

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