

The Future of Brand Activations

By Ellie Winslow 2021

Let's Talk About Activations:

If you ask 100 different people what a brand activation is, you'll probably get 100 different responses. As one of the newer forms of marketing, a widely accepted definition or idea of what they are has yet to take hold. Many people feel activations are one-off experiences or require being in-person, however, this simply isn't the case. It's time to give brand activations a definition that allows room for further growth and evolution and is aware of the scope of what activations are today.

So, what is it?

Brand activation is a term for short-term experiential tools used to generate awareness, deepen connections with existing audiences, or achieve another objective with the goal of elevating a brand.

The experiential tools can be almost anything that would "activate" the brand, making it tangible and visible. The point of them is to engage with the consumer in some way, making it different than traditional marketing or branding where consumers take a more passive role. As long as the tool is not permanent and engaging with the purpose to reach an objective and elevate the brand, it's a brand activation. Some of the most popular tools are experiential marketing efforts, free trials, giveaways, on-site activations, booths at trade shows, and workshops.

Elevating the brand is of course the ultimate goal, but this can be met by achieving a variety of diverse objectives. The most common include, increasing brand awareness, tapping into a new target market, deepening connections with a current audience, increasing positive brand sentiment, and increasing awareness of new products.



Why short-term?

Short-term simply means "not-permanent" or not perceivable to the consumer as permanent. If something is permanent, it becomes a part of the brand's services or its branding. If it is long-term, it probably has objectives that lead to other goals besides brand elevation.

What activations could look like and achieve:

A custom-built endcap in a grocery store	This experiential marketing tactic increases brand awareness and can be interacted with to deepen the understanding of the brand and generate awareness of new products.
A brand offering a free trial of their service	This free trial helps brands tap into potential markets and gives consumers a chance to interact with the products and services.
A swag box sent to loyal customers	This giveaway of free products helps to deepen the connection with current brand loyalists, making them feel special while they try new products and offerings.
A process tour at a brewery	This on-site activation deepens connections with their current audience as they become even more invested in what the brand does and offers.
A booth at South by Southwest or tradeshow	This event-based activation increases brand awareness and gives consumers a space to explore, interact with, test products, and gain an understanding of the brand's values.
A yoga workshop at an athletic apparel store	This event helps serve the consumers doing what they love, under the name of the brand, increasing positive perceptions.

You can think of brand activations as cars.

Cars come in all shapes and sizes and are experiential tools that take a specific group of people from point A to point B.

Brand activations also come in all different forms and are experiential tools that take their target audience (specific group of people) from how they currently think/feel/act regarding the brand (Point A) to how brands want them to think/feel/or act (Point B).

The best way too get people from point A to point B? Personal Relationships.



On personal relationships:

Simon Sinek explains in his Golden Circle Model (Sinek, 2009) that most companies talk about what the product is, then method of how they accomplish the product, and then why the brand exists. The companies that stand out however, start with the reason, then describe method, and then mention the product. They flip the order and start with the "why."

Leading with the why brings power since brands have values, ambitions, hopes, dreams, and intentions. A brand's why is relatable and creates a personal connection.

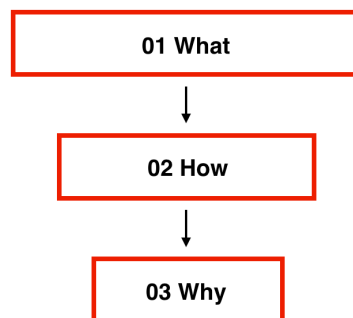
Research has shown the following:

- "Personal value has twice the impact of business value when it comes to B2B purchase decisions" (Hadfield, 2019).
- "98% of people feel more inclined to purchase a brand's products after attending an activation" (Hadfield, 2019).
- "Individuals who have a positive experience are likely to discuss them with up to 17 other people, and 93% of consumers feel more connected to a brand after participation in such an event" ("What is the..." n.d.).
- "65% of marketers notice a direct sales boost from experiential marketing" ("What is the..." n.d.).
- "80% of marketers believe live events are critical to their company's success, and 77% use experiential marketing as a vital part of a brand's advertising strategy" (Wertz, 2019).
- "93% of consumers claim that live events have a larger influence on them than tv ads" (Wertz, 2019).

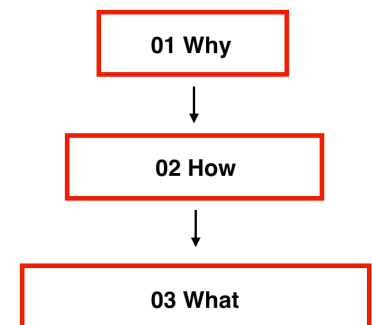
The Golden Circle Model applied to brand activations:

Simon Sinek's model can be applied to brand activations. The "why" is the reason for the activation to occur, the "how" is the experiential tool, and the "what" is the specific attributes of the tool, aka what is being offered to the consumer. Powerful activations, like powerful brands start with "why." This is what brings power and connection.

Most Companies



Powerful Companies



Think about it this way...

Have you ever tried to truly connect and form a relationship with someone you've never met or interacted with? You may have heard of them, read something they wrote, heard someone you know talk about them, but you yourself have never interacted with them. If this were the case, it would be almost impossible to form a connection with them. That's why activations exist- they provide an opportunity for a brand to form a relationship with potential consumers or deepen connections with their existing audience.

Activation success

These common success criteria are the starting points in building an activation. Naturally there are other factors to consider depending on the brand and tool you choose, but these 6 criteria will help guide you.

- 01 Have a clear purpose based on the “why” of the brand.**
- 02 Be authentic to the brand.**
- 03 Have a deep understanding the target audience.**
- 04 Provide value to consumers.**
- 05 Be unique and high quality.**
- 06 Inspire continued conversation.**

Common success criteria of activations:

Have a clear purpose based on the “why” of the brand.

We have established that the why of the brand is the most powerful aspect of it, and is what creates that personal value with consumers. A clear purpose or outcomes also allows for better measurements and tracking to gauge success.

Be authentic to the brand.

The activation needs to paint a clear picture of what the brand is and stands for. No one likes or trusts mixed signals, so keeping authenticity is huge.

Have a deep understanding the target audience.

This means truly knowing and having empathy with their desires, their pains, their aspirations. If you create an activation you know your target will like, you have a better chance of success.

Provide value to consumers.

You always want to make sure that your customers have a reason to be at the activation. You cannot expect them to show up and cheer for a brand that isn't doing anything for them in return.

Be unique and high quality.

The activation, while it occurs, needs to be special and stand out against the noise. Coupled with this is the quality of the activation itself. It should not be something cheap and easily replicated or taken by another brand.

Inspire continued conversation.

Continued conversation can occur from a multitude of sources. From a swag item for people to take and have once it is over, to an activation centered around bringing awareness to a worthy cause which sparks a lasting conversation, successful activations have longevity through conversation.

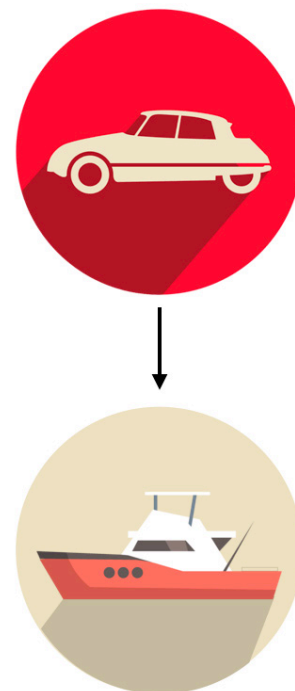
What About the Pandemic?

Brand activations in 2020 and beyond is like a car turning into a boat.

Cars function on land, and 2020 is a flood. It has made it to where cars can't drive. A car needs to turn into a boat that fundamentally serves the exact same purpose (a specific group of people from point A to B), but it is better suited to this current flooded environment.

Brand activations function best in places where you can be in-person. The environment has changed and made this interaction virtually impossible. Brand activations now need to adapt and change into something else that serves the same purpose but is better suited to this social distancing-required environment.

These changes are already happening. Within weeks brands had adapted their activations to fit CDC guidelines and regulations, and even now almost a year later we have a whole arsenal of widely accepted and frequently used pivots. These pivots are the “boats” of activations.



What activations look like now:

Some activations look the exact same as before while others have changed entirely. For example, while an endcap at a grocery store doesn't have to change, a booth at a tradeshow with millions of people attending will.

What the activations turn into is up to the brand's affinity towards risk, their budget, and overall what is best for them and their goals. Regardless, here are some previous tools and their new pivots.

What about not activating?

Brands may choose to not activate during this time to save money. While this is entirely understandable, it may be advantageous in the long-run from a customer-relationship standpoint to run an altered activation you can afford.

Previous Tool:

Pivot:

Solution Quality:

In-person events	Drive-Thru events	This is extremely expensive and still requires enhanced safety measures for the staff, but is extremely creative and effective. Events like these bring people out of their homes safely and are incredibly innovative and memorable.
	In-person events with precautions	In-person events at a smaller scale with sanitation measures are a possibility. They need to be executed with the highest degree of precautions to protect the health and safety of consumers, or else be prepared for a PR nightmare.
	Virtual-only events	Virtual-only pivots are cheap and easy but are unfortunately only worsening screen fatigue. These events need to understand that the quality is not the same and therefore brands should not charge the same price as an in-person event. Finally, virtual-only events should include a schedule to replicate the freedom of choice consumers would have had in person.
	Virtual events with a physical component	Some brands have started to host virtual events and then send a physical component such as supplies to "play along" with the virtual event. This helps to transform the home into a new world and gives people tangible elements to interact with, similar to an in-person event.
Classes or workshops	Item boxes sent to consumers	Boxes of items for people to interact with and use on their own time is a great way for brands to interact with consumers. These boxes come with everything someone needs to create an experience they could have gotten from the brand, or create experiences that they would like using products the brand has.
Behind-the-scenes tours	Microsites	The creation of microsites with a virtual tour, walkthrough, or VR experience for people to be a part of on their own schedule helps to replicate autonomy. This helps to bring people out of the mindset of being in their own homes and enjoy what they would have in person.

However...

These pivots are not the future of brand activations. New pivots will pop up, old pivots will die out, this is the present. The future of brand activations is not what they'll look like. No, the future of brand activations are the strategies used to help combat the new realities this pandemic is causing.

Strategy

Brand activations are so broad and therefore impossible to state the exact future. This is why the strategies behind creating an activation are the future. Here are 5 strategies to consider to help consumers combat COVID realities.

- 01 Create a new world for your consumer.**
- 02 Think twice before making something all virtual.**
- 03 Assume money is a pain point for your consumers.**
- 04 Beware of creating crowds.**
- 05 Brands need to exercise empathy and compassion... authentically.**



Strategies to consider for the new realities consumers face:

Create a new world for your consumer.

Being able to transform their home into a unique space, or bring them into a new world whether virtually or physically will be beneficial to their mental health and to the activation itself. This is because People's homes have become their office, their place of entertainment, daycare, school, and everything in between. They need something that will transport them anywhere else.

Think twice before making something all virtual.

Screen fatigue will be your killer. If you do want things to be virtual, allow people to choose their own path to replicate reality, or deliver the physical world digitally. This is because people stare at screens from the moment they wake up until the moment they fall asleep. That meeting at work? A Zoom call. Meeting up with your friends? A FaceTime call. That night out? A night in watching a movie. Everyone is sick of it.

Assume money is a pain point for your consumers.

Brands should consider donating to charities, giving back to the community, or simply giving a break to brand loyalists who would have purchased but are unable to do so at this time. Brands should be aware that people don't have the money or want to spend the same amount to attend a virtual activation. This is because budgets are tighter. People are losing their disposable incomes and are forced to make tough choices. When you don't have as much money to spend, and a brand is asking for the same price to deliver infinitely less, that choice is clear.

Beware of creating crowds.

Carrying on with in-person events with heightened sanitation measures is entirely possible, but still risky. Brands need to make sure that those heightened sanitation measures work or else that could be a PR nightmare. You want to protect your consumer's mental state, well-being, and make it memorable for them in the right ways.

Brands need to exercise empathy and compassion... authentically.

Brands bragging and using flashy tricks, problematic influencers, and unnecessarily wasteful events doesn't work anymore. People are turned off by this almost selfishness.

This is because the rose colored glasses are off. Today, consumers are struggling. People are losing their jobs, their disposable income, their family members, friends, their mental state, and for some- their entire way of life. If they aren't personally, others who they care about are. Consumers don't want to feel like brands are using them to make money and get views when they're hurting. They want to feel that the brand really cares about them and is willing to help them out.

The future of brand activations:

The future of brand activations lies in brands transitioning into the role of a supporter, and having a consumer-focused "why" as the basis and reason for their activation to occur.

It's worth repeating...

The future of brand activations lies in brands transitioning into the role of a supporter, and having a consumer-focused "why" as the basis and reason for their activation to occur.

Being a supporter goes beyond providing value.

Providing value is just an exchange. It's: "You showed up to something that benefits me this so I will give you something in return." Any activation no matter why it was created can and should provide value.

Acting as a supporter is something different. It is the result of one of two categories of why an activation happened in the first place. To relate it to the Golden Circle Model, we are saying the reason for the activation is the "why."

So, The first is category is consumer-centered activations, or brands as supporter. In this case, you lead with and prioritize the consumer. This conversation would look like: "You're my customer. I care about you so much I made this thing for you to make your life better."

The second category is brand-centered. You lead with and prioritize the brand. This conversation would look like: "I want an increase in this area of my business so I will create this thing that will provide value to my customers so they will show up, and like it."

Both of these "whys" or "categories" of an activation have worked. But the pandemic took those rose colored glasses off and they see brands using them to further their own goals rather than helping them.

Breaking it down:

While providing value is something different, being a supporter occurs out of the reason for an activation to take place. Instead of the reason being brand centered, it should be focused on the consumer.

Providing Value

Is an exchange.

Can occur no matter what the reason behind the activation is.

Consumer-Centered

(AKA a Supporter)
Leads with and prioritizes the consumer.

Brand-Centered

Leads with and prioritizes the brand.

Some examples:

The IKEA Dining Club from 2016 and the Taco Bell Hotel from 2019 will help to illustrate the difference between consumer-centered and brand-centered activations, and why this distinction is so important. If you aren't aware of what they are, watch these two brief YouTube videos:

[The Dining Club by IKEA](#)

[Here's Your Inside Look At The Bell Hotel | Taco Bell](#)



Case study analysis

Both of these activations were successful. They were authentic, provided value, were unique, high quality, and memorable. They produced media traction and achieved their goals. Looking at them separately, there are some noticeable differences between them.

IKEA

IKEA was consumer-centered.

You can immediately tell because they led with the why, and it directly related to improving the lives of every day consumers. This activation was free on a first come first serve basis for anyone who wanted it. IKEA simply wanted to create a space for people to cook and entertain their friends. That's a brand as a supporter. That's a brand who understood their target and created something specifically for them to make their lives better. If something like this happened today, a person would be impressed that IKEA took the time and resources to give back to consumers. This strategy for creating an activation would be successful in the pandemic world.

Taco Bell

Taco Bell was brand-centered.

You can tell by what they led with the "what." They lead with the free food, sunrise yoga, pool, concerts, happy hour, et cetera. They invited almost exclusively influencers and reporters who would talk about it. They wanted their "what" to be desirable.

Taco Bell never mentioned the why. They never said "we are making this hotel for you to take a step back and relax" - no. The activation was clearly made to create buzz about the brand. And in today's pandemic world, people are more likely to see that and react negatively to it. If you brought this activation into today and told a random person "These influencers got to stay in this taco bell themed hotel for free and they got all these perks." that person would say "Okay great, I have bills to pay and these influencers who don't need anything else are getting special treatment." They would be turned off. This activation wouldn't be as successful if done today.

Not only did these two brands flip the order of the golden circle model in the way they portrayed them, but their foundations and the strategy of building the activation was different. It's the strategy that is based in helping consumers that will be the strategy for brand activations in the future.

Wrapping it up:

Firstly, it's the process of activations adapting. It's like turning cars into boats. It's taking the same purpose and changing it's form to fit the current environment, whatever that may be.

Secondly, the future of brand activations is about changing the strategy for which activations are based on. It's about moving away from brand-centered whys to consumer-centered whys.

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