



GRANDSTANDING THE BRAND

The importance of brand positioning at major exhibitions has become an increasingly big ticket budget item for the regional development industry during the recent boom years. **Claire Malcolm** looks behind-the-scenes at the rationale for grandstanding the brand in today's competitive and changing marketplace

For anyone who's been involved in the real estate development industry for a season or two, take a walk through the halls of any major Cityscape event and it's blindingly obvious that the business of exhibition stand design has come a long way from the basic shell schemes of just a few years ago.

Today's multi-level, interactive, touch screen and model-stacked stands are mini-me developments in their own right, and with each new show season it seems that the clarion call for the brand is simply to produce something bigger and better.

Jeremy Garbett, managing director of Dubai-based communications agency Action Impact, believes that this strategy is on its way out, as he explains: "There is a declining 'bigger is best' approach and clients are starting to have a better understanding and appreciation of the communications business.

"It's all about having that relationship where you can look each other in the eye and say, you can do things better this way if you take it in this direction. Those are quite brave conversations, but the new cautiousness of the market may actually help force clients to become more careful with their marketing budgets."

According to Garbett, the financials behind some of the more extravagant stands can run anywhere between US\$1.5-2.5 million – a staggering figure – whereas the smaller shell schemes represent a 'paltry' US\$135,000 in comparison.

Ousama Ghannoum, marketing and media director for ALDAR Properties says that exhibition presence "is a sizeable portion of our budget allocation", with the spend divided into three main financial areas – the space within the event, the actual stand and the post-show follow-up.

He admits that the desire to produce something better each budget year is natural, but says: "We don't feel the pressure to compete. It's more the venue that demands what you do. We do exhibitions in smaller venues and it is an equally successful experience. You raise expectations each time you exhibit and that's what puts you under more pressure."

Garbett adds: "If I compare this region to the European experience – we did a number of large exhibition stands, but nothing like on the scale we see here. Where I've seen it work well in Europe is where there's been a front to it – a teaser campaign."

For Kuwait-based architectural firm KEO International, it's also a major financial consideration. "We budget this in as a high priority, with 70 percent of the annual PR budget devoted to the three Cityscape events we participate in," remarks Brad Batcheller, director, public relations and corporate branding.



OBJECTIVE SHOWCASE

Garbett's long-term European experience has enabled him to bring a fresh perspective to his nine-month old Middle Eastern tenure, as he explains: "What's missing over here is a bit of an audience journey and some touch points that really turn an audience on, be it on an exhibition stand or at a sales centre, for example."

Ghannoum is also on the same wavelength and is confident that ALDAR is on the right track in terms of its exhibition offering. "We want people to walk through the stand and experience ALDAR on a journey through our developments. With all our projects on display, in addition to the renderings, we always make sure that there is an actual project status update as well as a construction update image which shows that we are actually delivering on our promise."

"People can really relate to that and we get great feedback from our clients and find that it creates a level of excitement for our investors."

For Action Impact, the starting point is an in-depth examination of the client's target audience and their needs. "We need to take half a step back before rushing into designing the thing and look at the client's objectives, what the audience wants and how they should feel when walking away," says Garbett.

In order to do this, the company has set up a creative insight department, something that Garbett says is normal practice in Europe, but a new tool for the Middle East. "It works beautifully as there is a lot of in-depth examination pre-pitch whereby we look at the brief, the client, the profile and the audience, and question things that really help us to get to a better creative solution."

TAILORED COMMUNICATION

The exhibition environment is unique from a communications perspective. Garbett says: "When we do work for real estate companies they are generally in 'shouting mode'. They are exhibiting in a tin shed and it's a highly competitive arena, particularly in this region."

"The biggest stand, the number of attractive hostesses, the amount of money spent on stand furniture – some of these are client ego things which, frankly, I think the sooner we see the back of them, the better. The shouting needs to be tuned more towards the messaging. It's not the size of the LED screen now, it's what goes on the LED screen that counts, and it's the content that's becoming king."

Ghannoum believes that it is equally important to factor in brand ambience as it is to deliver a physically appealing product, as he explains: "It's very important for us that people come and experience the ALDAR stand, and we want them to feel like they are at home here."

"One thing we believe that we do differently from other companies is to create a mood. Last year we launched the Al Raha development, and we recreated its ambience, with the use of blue lighting, themed music and integrated water effects; all of which reflected the project and captured the essence of the Al Raha lifestyle experience."

KEO's Batcheller says that stand presence today has evolved in a different direction. "Many years ago it was about educating only our industry peers, now there are many functions of the stand beyond skin value. We meet and greet people by coordinating a coffee break at our booth, using it as the anchor to then explore the rest of the floor and see KEO projects shown at other stands," he says.

ATTRACTING FOOTFALL

"The best stands are those that are clear in their messaging and target the three kinds of audience members by offering different types of stories to attract them," says Garbett.

His water analogy identifies the 'dabbler' – a visitor who whizzes through a stand and stays for maybe two to three minutes maximum; the 'swimmer' who spends, on average, between five to 10 minutes and will have already earmarked that stand or brand when they come to the exhibition; and the 'diver'. "This is someone who stays on the stand for more than 30 minutes and will engage in conversation, actively seeking out your brand ambassadors," he comments. "If you have brilliant, engaged staff this means that you will forget all about the stand – even a negatively-designed one. Now if you have the best staff and a well-designed, attractive stand that's easy to move around and which offers space and clarity in the messaging and a nice storyline throughout, then you've got a real winner," he adds.

Batcheller agrees. "It's essential to have knowledgeable staff on hand to answer specific corporate questions. Having a model deliver a description of technical services list is not going to work. It has to be clear that we are there not as sellers but as exhibitors and industry peers.→"



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“We distribute books about our projects to our staff ahead of time and while not everyone will know every project, KEO staff will be aware of the basics on all items at the stand. We diversify the divisions, mixing infrastructure people with construction experts and designers. We want all staff present to be able to address our independent services as a unified team.”

The ALDAR team takes it one step further with in-depth training for its on-stand model contingent, as Ghannoum explains: “We spend two to three days briefing them on our key projects and the pertinent information. They really are an invaluable part of the experience and help us to take care of our guests. It is becoming an expectation to see models at events and we ensure that all the ones we use are extremely well briefed.”

KILLING THE BRAND

For KEO’s Batcheller, the challenge of delivering presence par excellence is tough. “Looking unique at an event such as Cityscape is often a failure by many, as the contractors are at times left to perform concept design.

“The central floor area is used to draw the crowds to look at the property product. Our challenge on the perimeter is not as specific as the real estate firms in the middle. The architecture crowd is more focused on services - design, infrastructure or construction-related queries - and therefore our booth has to have a more refined approach. Our goals at KEO are much more educational and awareness-based.

“Consistent brand messaging and simplistic, sleek booths are definitely the ones to watch. Trends come and go in every industry, and you have to be careful about designing to follow a trend. The risks are most evident when there is a booth that is so unique that some visitors feel uncomfortable approaching it.”

Once again, it is simply a question of following some basic rules, which are all too often ignored, according to Garbett: “I’ve seen stand designs which are congested and where people actually get stressed.

“Good basic stand design at a busy show must include areas of light, shade and adequate space – you need to have areas of quiet, of activity and I’m very keen on creating pools of light and then pools of semi-darkness and space, so people can move around. Many brands make the mistake of saying let’s cram it with furniture and brochure stands and other things – a bigger bang for the buck.

“If I go back to automotive stands once more, if you have space between the cars on display then it gives them an almost jewellery-like effect and appeal – it’s a

LIVE EXPERIENCE

Even business-to-business events are not immune to the entertainment factor more often associated with FMCG product launches or tourism events, but Garbett cautions against the urge to flaunt without adequate foresight.

“If you want to introduce some sort of live event or entertainment then it has to be something pertinent to the brand and aligned with your brand messaging, to add value rather than simply being superfluous,” he comments.

“I’ve seen a stand by a French automotive manufacturer in Paris, which was a launch reveal system for a car, with hydraulics, dramatic music, smoke drifting around, etc. It was designed to look fabulous on paper but the problem was that the location was in the corner of an exhibition hall, next to a massive set of windows.

“There was no ceiling, on the stand, no blackout or theatre and everything about it was just like looking at an event in a staff canteen. There are some simple rules – if you are going to have a good lighting set-up on the stand you need to have some blackout, so the eye is going to go where the light is pointing – these are basic theatre rules. This instantly creates a mood,” he adds.

He says that the secret to live event success is to “look past Cirque du Soleil and people running around on stilts, which was done to death in Europe 10 years ago, and run with something with a well-executed learning or educational angle that is held on a regular basis throughout the show, promoted well in advance and which is captivating without being patronising – I think there’s real mileage there.”



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show-off thing. Beautiful lighting and minimal product. You need to create a little bit of an oasis here and there.”

Ghannoum agrees. “We have a good location at the different events, so while it’s very crowded outside you feel a sense of serenity in our space. And it is also important for the experience inside, even if your booth is among other booths you can still create your own space.”

“It all starts with the brief for the agency. There are many excellent agencies out there that produce outstanding creative work and each one has good ideas, however it really has to be a partnership whereby if they feel your energy and passion then they will do a good job,” he adds.

STANDING TALL

The way forward for branding in the very public domain of an exhibition floor is a matter of good design and materials, according to Garbett. “A big factor is the need to use better materials and better lighting. I think that the general quality and design of stands and manufacturing will begin to climb [here] because there’s a lot more Europeans and North Americans moving around in our marketplace and those marketeers want this and understand it.

“The build quality you see and feel in some of the better hotels here, you will start to see used in some of the stands. The use of limestone, granite or marble needs to be applied in a sparing way, as it’s expensive, but when it’s done well it is gorgeous.”

However, he also says that the quality of the messaging that accompanies a good-looking stand still needs to “go up another four or five notches.”

“There has got to be more real interactivity with the customer and that doesn’t mean just having a touch screen. It means people becoming actively engaged with something that they are intrigued by and enjoy. That’s the clever stuff that stand designers and agencies need to do – which only happens when you really understand what kind of people are coming to your stand in the first place, and what they like to do,” he adds.

For Batcheller, the location within the exhibition halls is as important for KEO as what they actually offer on-stand. “KEO is lucky to have been involved with Cityscape since the beginning, and therefore we have been given the option to keep within the most active halls. As we can’t dish out the big bucks of the real estate firms in the center of the halls, we try to maximise our presence by expansion vertically,” he remarks.

BEYOND THE SHOW FLOOR

Rounding out the brand positioning from the inside (the exhibition) to the outside world is something that all three gentlemen feel passionately about. Says Ghannoum: “From pre-show advertising to create awareness, to presence outside of the show halls with banners and branding, this is vital marketing activity.

“For big shows such as the Cityscape events, we always mention the stand number in our advertising campaigns to create awareness. Word-of-mouth is extremely important, as is sponsor activity.”

Garbett says that a lot more work needs to be done beyond the exhibition stand, both pre- and post-event from web presence and face-to-face communications, to penetrative analysis to correctly target the right customer.



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On a more practical application level, ALDAR’s Ghannoum comments: “I learned something in exhibiting, and that is that you always expect people to want to take away the grand brochures, but in fact they want something that’s easy and convenient to carry. So this is where we are concentrating our efforts and also looking at environmentally-friendly non-paper based options.

“Giveaways have also become a customary part of exhibiting, and that’s good for the branding. People have an expectation that they will get something as a memento, whether it’s a pen, a hat or even just a mint.”

Batcheller has a different take on the benefits of giveaways, as he explains: “The teaser of having mints or items to slow the traffic down helps to initiate a conversation.”

FUTURE PRESENCE

The current global economic downturn has a potential plus side according to Action Impact’s Garbett. “We’ve already seen clients start to back away from making major decisions and so we are asking them to help themselves through better planning. We are now seeing some clients breaking down their spend to reflect and measure delivery as well as marketing.”

“With the current economic downturn, quality is going to become increasingly important. People need to be more convinced and that will benefit us because clients will increasingly turn to agencies who understand their audience.”

But, despite budgetary concerns he believes that we will still continue to see the good, the bad and the ineffectual on the exhibition circuit.

“The property development world needs to work a lot harder to make it a lot sexier, and there’s a huge amount of work to be done in order to get to the right build quality, the right design and the right content.”

With a tough fiscal year ahead, the physical manifestation of creativity versus purse string capabilities will be a fairly accurate reflection of the status of the development industry across all emerging markets. It remains to be seen whether the big guns in the Middle East will ramp up their exhibition activity or refine their offering. ●

