# 7 Designing and Mapping Event Experiences

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### Learning objectives

- To know and understand the six main elements which underpin the human experience.
- To understand, and apply an experience design modelling process.
- To understand, and apply an experience design mapping process.

## Introduction

The first chapter of this book commented on the heightened attendee expectations in an increasingly competitive event marketplace. For these reasons event creators are rightfully preoccupied with the design of engaging and memorable experiences for attendees. This chapter will scrutinize the fluid and complex nature of the human experience and present an overarching model that brings together many of the core dimensions of the human experience to advance our understanding of how to design and deliver event experiences. This model is supported by a range of tools that enable us to better understand the experience design processes. The conceptual notions presented here are illustrated through the exploration of a UK charity event, and two international case studies.

## The event experience: a complex concept

Whilst the events industry is very much concerned with the challenges of designing and delivering experiences, we must firstly systematically define what constitutes the human experience (Poulsson and Kale, 2004). Early in the 1980s Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982) made a significant contribution

to the understanding of the experiential perspectives of consumer experiences, with Holbrook (1999, pp.8-9) later noting the central position of experience in the creation of consumer value:

> Finally, by experience, I mean that consumer value resides not in the product purchased, not in the brand chosen, not in the object possessed, but rather in the consumption experience(s) derived therefrom

It is noteworthy that a number of authors were simultaneously arriving at rather similar conclusions. In the final year of the 20th century Schmitt produced a key text on Experiential Marketing, referring to a 'new century of marketing' (1999, p.11), and Pine and Gilmore (1991) produced their key work on the Experiential Economy. This focus on experience persists, evidenced convincingly by the fact that customer-facing staff, in what is reputedly the most successful adventure company in the world, operating in more than one hundred countries, and serving more than 100,000 customers every year, are given the title of CEO. For G-Adventures the title does not mean Chief Executive Officer, but Chief Experience Officer (Poon Tip, 2013).

Event creators are in effect designers of experiences, which somewhat elevates the role given that the concept of experience is complex and multidimensional. Our understanding of the human experience has its roots in many fields and disciplines, covering both the social sciences and the natural sciences. The more insight event creators can gain, then the more the design of event experiences can develop into a predictive skill, based upon informed and purposeful action (Berridge, 2012).

So what is an event experience, and how is it special in the way it might differ from an 'everyday' experience?

People construct their own unique experiences, based on their perception, and the experience will be heavily influenced by factors such as personal needs, past experiences, and selective sensory focusing (McIntyre and Roggenbuck, 1998). A number of authors talk of an experience, rather than everyday experiencing, and suggest that for events there should be a 'wow' factor, and be memorable, special, and conceivably unique (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Berridge, 2012; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011). Schmitt (1999, p.22) suggests that people want experiences to 'dazzle their senses, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds'. Schmitt also notes that experiences are not static, but fluid, creating an ever changing perceptual novelty. Experience is a slippery concept, and no matter how hard we try to grasp it there will always be parts that will escape the homogenizing grasp. The meaning derived from any event is uniquely perceived and processed by individuals; given the disparate nature of event audiences the facilitation of attendee experience is always going to be an inexact science. This unpredictability, integral to the appeal of events, is captured by Sheets-Johnstone

(2009, p. 380) who describes how experiences can create 'instances in which we are at a loss for words, so stunned by something we cannot speak'. This elusive dimension within event design is also recognised by Burr (2003) who suggests that we should regard such forms of experience as existing outside the realm of language, i.e. as 'extra discursive' or resistant to description. This does not necessarily mean that such experiences cannot be designed; the short case study below illustrates an unusual experience which cannot easily be described. This fits with the notion that event creation is indeed an art, as well as a science, with creators adopting the guise of choreographers, facilitators and curators rather than organisers.

## Case study:  Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden, Hong Kong

At Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden in Hong Kong (website: www.kfbg.org.hk) a series of events are offered for the public each year that work with the notion of the 4Hs: Head, Hands, Heart and Home. These events include experiences that involve the 'more than human world' (MTHW), with exciting possibilities for transformative encounters with other people and the animal, plant and spiritual world. Two dimensions of the human experience, notably the sense of being and belonging can involve more complex design (see Baumeister, and Leary, 1995). Their events include, for example; a half-day and a full day of silence and personal transformation, a low carbon living event, Good Life Sunday Events, working with self-sufficiency methods that use the 24 solar rhythms of the Chinese calendar, Sensory Days with Plants, and many other more than human world 'encounters'.

The half day and day events of silence and transformation have attracted over one hundred people during the first two years of delivery. The event involves facilitators taking participants through a peaceful and uplifting experience in the serene surroundings of beautiful tropical forest and gardens in a remote part of the island of Hong Kong. The core physical activity is a slow walk up to the summit of Kwun Yum Shan Mountain, at an altitude of 552 metres. On this slow walk participants experience mindful walking, sitting silently in nature, story-telling, stretching activities, sharing and showing gratitude to nature. The experience involves time out, with others, to contemplate life, quieten the mind, and generally slow down. Many participants remarked that sitting listening to the sounds of flowing water was very special.

In the instructions sent to participants people are 'requested to respect other participants by maintaining silence throughout the journey'. Many of the participants reported that they experienced a significant quieting of the mind, a special closeness to nature, and inner peace and well-being. A significant number of participants expressed a wish to return to experience more of these events. In the future the experience may involve being alone, lying and gently rocking in hammocks for a short while in the tropical forests, simply contemplating life and just being.

7

The tension between the experience and writing or talking about it is evocatively portrayed by Robert Kull in his book *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes*, Kull writes about a life changing experience when he spent a year in remote Patagonia immersing himself in a state of solitude. He skilfully describes how language obstructs the process of understanding, designing and describing events from an experiential perspective.

> There is no dance between word and world. What I see and feel begs a sensuous tango, but my words march static and stiff in lines across the page.

> (Kull, 2008, p.184).

The one dimensional form of written and spoken word can thus create significant limitation for event design. We simply cannot entirely comprehend experience, and similarly the art of experience creation is imperfect. To add to the challenge of designing event experiences, the sensory experience that event designers create, such as music, décor, or performance, will be experienced differentially by individuals and groups within the audience. This experience will be determined by their own antecedents. Consider an eager teenager at a music event with their favourite band. Significantly for design, the intention, anticipation, and expectation of the audience prevail, providing the pre-conditions for the experience to be memorable, linked to their heightened sensory state. The same sensory stimuli is available to their protective parent who has accompanied them to the concert but their intention, anticipation, and expectation are dissimilar, and their senses are less likely to be similarly stimulated by the experience. The experience is 'read' differently. In extending this principle it is not surprising therefore that Petterson and Getz (2009, p.310) contend that "(event) experiences cannot be fully designed, they are both personal (i.e. psychological) constructs that vary with the individual, as well as being social and cultural constructs related to influences on the individual and the (often) social nature of events".

Despite the above discussion, event designers remain highly influential in shaping whether attendee experiences are basic, memorable, or transforming (Hover and Mierlo, 2006). As Berridge (2012) indicates, if we don't design, we leave the experience to chance, if we do design, we increase the predictability of the event outcome. It can be further suggested that if we inadequately design, we adversely affect the experience outcome.

Immersive experiences transform an ordinary event into an unforgettable adventure and make engaging with a brand feel natural. This brings about an opportunity for brands to take a closer look at the lifestyles and interests of their communities. The most immersive experiences can be achieved by surrounding the event with engaging technological aspects. 3D mapping can create a dramatic impact on a large scale at a lower cost than many. It has the power to transform the events more mesmerizing. Ambient interactivity is designed primarily as a futuristic concept presentation mode that avails information sharing inside the organization. This technique demonstrates how technology can be transmitted automatically and transparently without direct human interaction. Mapping customer journeys provides the insight for the design of better experiences. This in turn contributes to revenue growth. Once you determine the level of formality, convince decision makers to back your effort. Customer journey maps tend to focus on the experiential side of the equation, with only a brief description of the service provision processes. Service blueprints focus on the backstage processes. An experience map focuses on the broad customer experience but could also include detailed descriptions of the organization's actors and processes. Contrasting examples of each are shown in the following three figures to illustrate these differences. Figure 4-8 shows a customer journey map created by Macadamian, a full-service software and design firm. Event planning is easier when it's visual. Here's how a simple mind map can help you organize anything from a small press event to a large-scale conference. Whether you're planning a wedding, a press conference or a corporate event, maintaining a good overview of all your resources, tasks, deadlines and stakeholders is key. A mind map is a fantastic format for event planning as it enables you to collect all information related to the event in a centralized place, invite your co-organizers to collaborate with you, and go efficiently from brainstorming to execution. To make things a little less theoretical, we're going to use a practical example to explain the method of event planning with mind maps. Imagine the following scenario The Customer Experience Curve is an incredibly useful framework which can help you identify critical moments that make or break the brand experience. This framework, also known as the Customer Journey Map, is essentially a timeline which illustrates the highlights and obstacles your customers encounter while "consuming" your event. A well-executed Customer Journey Map will help you uncover problematic areas by visualising the entire end-to-end journey of your event participants. Here are a few guidelines on how to map the customer experience and why it is important to do so: Identifying the to