

SHARES DON'T EQUAL SUCCESS: BUILDING BETTER BRAND ENGAGEMENT IN THE ERA OF INSTAGRAM MUSEUMS

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Pass the brightly clad crowds outside NYC's Happy Go Lucky on opening morning this past June, and you might have thought the latest Yayoi Kusama exhibit was on display. Eager fans lined the SoHo street that housed the pop-up installation, ready to commemorate their pilgrimage with a photo shoot. Only they weren't there for art—they were there for a canvas for social media.

Across the country, photo ops masquerading as pop-up exhibits are reaching a fever pitch. A commercial take on the interactive art trend that saw installations like Kusama's "Infinity Rooms" draw major crowds, these events feature visually enticing sets specifically designed to serve as backdrops for social platforms, earning them nicknames like Instagram Museums and Selfie Factories. Some attendees go the extra mile to maximize the impact of their shots, planning their outfits to match the backgrounds or bringing professional photographers to capture them in action. This year alone, consumers in NYC can choose from experiences like Happy Go Lucky, the Museum of Pizza, the Museum of Candy, and Egg House. The White Girl Rosé-gramming crowd seeking new creative direction has Rosé Mansion. San Francisco has Color Factory, and LA has the self-aware Museum of Selfies. Enjoy avocado toast but not the aesthetic of the Aussie-style café that serves it? San Diego's The Cado has the solution.

Given the organic shares these spectacles are sparking on social media, marketers are eager to apply the trend to branded events and experiences, hoping that young generations' reputation for narcissism will prove true and help drum up excitement around their brand and, ideally, build loyalty. However, brands could soon find their efforts passé if they fall victim to a fatal flaw—thinking likes alone will keep consumers coming.

Savvy young consumers who drive trends are beginning to regard Instagram Museums as the thirst traps of experiences—visually enticing, but creatively bankrupt. They might still share a photo or video from one, but they won't necessarily feel loyalty to the brand that provided it or consider it a thought leader unless it offers them something more meaningful. If companies wish to be seen as innovative—a quality 91% of young consumers consider important, and a key factor in developing brand loyalty—they should design experiences that offer what Millennials and

Generation Z want even more than a photo op: opportunities for creation and growth.

Creativity is a quality that young generations put on a pedestal. They have come of age in a world in which the barrier for entry to traditional status symbols has been lowered, making creativity, not cost, a more elusive and desired status symbol. With this in mind, brands should appeal to young consumers as auteurs, not amateurs, by offering experiences that let them get hands-on and flex their own creativity, not merely provide backdrops that do the work for them. For young consumers, 71% even say they like to learn about a brand's creative process. The Museum of Ice Cream leveraged this mindset in NYC with its retail concept, The Pint Shop, which includes a tasting room with experiences that explore the origins of its vanilla ice cream, as well as a hands-on creative workshop series hosted by MOIC team members and social influencers.

Young generations have an open-source outlook and believe that knowledge should be shared rather than hoarded. They extend this mindset to brands, with 72% believing that brands have a responsibility to share their knowledge and expertise to help people learn. Just as retailers like West Elm have found success with consumers by incubating smaller brands through its LOCAL program, brands can serve as mentors for consumers by helping them grow personally or professionally. Shiseido is doing this with its program for high school girls, and LVMH is taking this approach to the next level with the launch of its accelerator program. Other brands like Jaguar Land Rover, Shell, and Teen Vogue are taking an event approach, launching experiences and summits that let consumers learn the inner workings of their brands and walk away with new knowledge and resources to leverage in their own lives.



The author at Happy Go Lucky in SoHo

Shares don't automatically equal success for brands, so optimizing a space for shares alone is a shortsighted approach. Those that take a more holistic approach to measuring ROI and put the consumer's deeper needs first will be better poised to build brand loyalty in the long run. The Millennials and Gen Zs that matter most want to create and grow more than they want an Instagram backdrop.

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