Creating Experiential Retail

Holding in-store special events and transforming customers into ambassadors will boost sales.

By Ryan Bloom

Today’s consumer is more informed than ever. Before entering a retail store or showroom, many consumers have done some form of research on the brands and products they are considering. To get practical information on the type of experience they want to buy into, many have watched YouTube videos or followed social-media accounts.

Experiential retail has been used to advantage by many of the world’s top brands, including Apple, Williams-Sonoma, and Tesla. They invest resources in actively engaging their customers with their products and brands. They know that the more their customers use and love their products and brands, they know that their experiences, are less price sensitive, and want to feel as though they are part of the retailer’s VIP club or in-crowd. At Urban Bonfire (Montreal, Quebec), we’ve found the use of interactive events to be the most time- and cost-effective strategy in creating ambassadors for grill/barbecue retailers.

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—Cameron Mitchell, Barbecue Country (Edmonton, Alberta)

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—Joe Pino, GrillBillies Barbecue LLC (Raleigh, North Carolina)

IN-STORE EVENTS

Five experiential-retail experts in the patio, hearth, and barbecue/grill industries recently shared their thoughts on hosting in-store events.

Marketing and advertising play key roles. You don’t want simply to host an event for the customers who happen to come in to shop that day. It’s important to use the appropriate media outlets (within your budget) for publicizing your event: print ads/newspaper, social-media platforms, email blasts, press releases, postcard/invitation mailings, in-store signage, and register handouts. In addition, reach out to the community: if holding an event geared toward children, contact and send out flyers to local schools, day-care centers, nursery schools, and so forth.

Monitoring event posts on social media is also important. Be mindful of the number of views and/or shares your events are receiving. As awesome as social media can be for getting the word out, that word can spread to too many people—possibly, more people than your event space can handle.

Don’t be hesitant to remove your post if the response is overwhelming, and be sure to look more closely at any shares your post may have received. People or groups might have shared your post with their followers—which might outnumber yours, potentially overexposing your event. As much as you appreciate their assistance in promoting your event, ask them to remove the shared post, based on the limitations of your event.

—Adriene Vesci, Bucks Country Gardens (Doylestown, Pennsylvania)

I keep enrollment to about 16 people for hands-on classes (so everyone can get involved). I want to make sure each class is on a date and at a time when I will get a good number of people to sign up; I always like to make the recipes simple, too, so people can duplicate them at home.

I have also realized that with my Big Green Egg class, people really just want to know how to use it. They don’t care about the recipe—just about how to smoke, grill, and sear. I love all our events, because they always drive people back to the store.

—Dan Marguerite, Backyard Barbecue Store (Wilmette, Illinois)

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One of the most important things to consider when hosting a special in-store event is to decide what you want to accomplish with this event. Is the purpose of the event to introduce the store to new customers, introduce new products to your existing customers, increase sales of a particular category of product, or provide clearance of existing products?

The purpose of the event will determine how you do your marketing and who will be the focus group of the marketing. It will also determine store setup, product pricing, and even staffing.

—Faye Schimke, Housewarmings (Lexington, Kentucky)
personable and welcoming strategy resonates far more with clients than a showroom full of cold, unused grills could resonate. It allows the presentation of a grill’s features and benefits to take on a practical angle, as clients envision how (and what) they will cook when they take that grill home.

Here are a few examples of interactive events that we use on an ongoing basis: At our weekly Saturday demos we feature a recipe that we cook for—and along with—our clients. This gives us the ability to show off the features and benefits of various grill brands and types (such as kamado, gas, and pellet models). By pairing people’s love of great food with an open forum, we create a simple and casual weekly learning ritual in our store. From ribs and wings to pizza and corn on the cob, we do something different each week. These demos are low in cost, high in impact, and easy to promote (through social media or our newsletter).

Each client who purchases a grill from us is invited to attend a private group class on barbecue. We include this offer as part of our sales process, and we also attach a monetary value to the invitation. This makes clients see and feel the value we are adding to their overall experience. We specifically invite a different local chef to teach each class—to answer food-related and technical questions of all types, while also guiding people through how best to use their newly purchased grills.

These classes typically result in amazing consumer engagement, major accessory purchases, and referrals. To attract an even larger audience and increase our visibility, we encourage each class guest to bring a friend and to post on social media.

About once a month, we bring a few grills/smokers and cook at community events. These include street festivals, charity events, and special events at homeless shelters. We are firm believers that success without giving back is failure, so we donate our time, equipment, food, and resources with pleasure. More and more clients today want to do business with companies that demonstrate strong values and integrity, as well as with companies that support their communities. Media coverage of us often includes this aspect of our business model as a result of our work with numerous local causes.

With the advancement of technology and the ease of finding information, lower prices, and online consumer reviews, it is clear that almost anything we offer to clients can be found on a website. It is critical that we, as specialty retailers of grills and accessories, offer our clients things that the internet cannot offer. We must invest our time, resources, and creativity in dynamic events that engage our clients.

We need to think about the lifetime value of the client versus the one-time transaction. Engaged clients who become passionate about cooking, grilling, and experimenting have incredible economic value to our businesses, as they will share their love and passion with the people around them. We must be the source for world-class equipment, knowledge, and passion. All can be demonstrated and celebrated by employing simple, fun, and creative events, demos, and classes.

Ryan Bloom is the owner of Urban Bonfire (Montreal, Quebec), a highly successful interactive retail store that specializes in selling grills and outdoor-kitchen products, as well as outdoor-living experiences.