

Swivel's Hauser changes clients' PR experience

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Earlier this month, when CareerBuilder.com sought a new way to reach tomorrow's work force, it turned to Erik Hauser and his firm Swivel Media.

Founded in 1999 by Hauser, who sees Swivel as a "media agnostic" firm that exists across the marketing spectrum,

Swivel launched a campaign to encourage college students to participate in an Interview

Aptitude Test. The test takes place inside a customized video booth and generates feedback on the interview.

Hauser's firm specializes in experiential marketing (EM), a strategy of interactively engaging consumers without the seemingly arbitrary boundaries that divide the communications disciplines.

"I don't think the spectrum is necessary. I think we are the spectrum," he says. "We weave every part of the experience where a person could interact with [a brand]."

Hauser says his first opportunity to test the limits of his philosophy came when Wells Fargo (WF) hired Swivel to build an interactive campaign to aid financial literacy in 2005. The bank allotted it unbridled freedom to use EM to make an impact on young consumers.

The result - *Stagecoach Island* - was the first online role-playing game used by a financial institution. It embedded fiscal literacy quizzes into the game's structure. The campaign was so successful that last year WF expanded *Stagecoach* with the help of Swivel.

"After [the launch], I began to realize the power of virtual worlds," Hauser notes. "They tore down the walls of geography."

Gina Fung, VP of experiential marketing at WF, says when it first approached Swivel, launching a virtual world was not even on the radar. But since Hauser created *Stagecoach Island*, the bank has expanded its EM efforts.

"He [melds] creativity and business relevance to meet our objectives," she says. "[He] is passionate about creating experiences in the real and virtual worlds."

But Hauser only accidentally stumbled upon the idea to launch Swivel. During a road trip around the US, he realized the complexity and diversity of the nation was not seen within traditional marketing.

"I felt like [conventional PR firms] were using cookie-cutter approaches for this one country," he recalls. "The reality is people are very different."

Hauser feels the distinction between EM and PR is tenuous, and the idea is to hone the campaign in order to find the best way to communicate with the public.

"The only difference between EM and PR is [the] different metrics," he says. "When you get down to it, both try to find the universal truth about the company and [convey] that to customers."

Although EM has become Swivel's signature tactic, Hauser does not protectively cloak his ideas as trade secrets. He launched the Experiential Marketing Forum in 2004 so that other marketing pros could share ideas and spread the word. Within the walls of the forum, competitors from around the globe become cooperating members in what Hauser calls an online think tank.

While he clearly focuses on EM, Hauser notes that he isn't declaring traditional PR dead. Rather, he is nudging the communications sector into considering tailoring its methods for a society that has become increasingly interactive.

"I believe we're all trying to do the same thing," he says. "Companies are not putting forth these monologue press releases anymore. Those days are gone. The smart ones weave these clever narratives that are increasing their pickup."

Erik Hauser

1999-present

Founder of Swivel Media

2004-present

Founder of the online Experimental Marketing Forum and director of the International Experiential Marketing Association

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