

PACKVERTISING

What happens to places in the digital era!?

With the word “place” we define a materially or mentally identified space environment. What we want to speak about are emotionally-lived spaces, interesting from the point of view of marketing and communication.

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Geographic or astronomical terms identify certain data with which we can objectively define places. Latitude, longitude, distance from another place and surface area: variables that identify a locality – and that locality alone – on the face of the earth! But the subjective element in “emotional” spaces that prevails over the objectivity of purely physical data is the part that assumes greater importance for our analysis. Here, we are speaking of feelings, of memories and suggestions that the place itself transmits to the individual in totally personal ways. The person-place bond – a territory or a country or a city – is a deep relationship characterized more by affection and sentiments than by merely material aspects: it is an ensemble of perceptions and emotions.

In these cases, we speak of “humanistic definition” of places – different from the merely scientific one – and of private geography” that avails itself of instruments such as literature, the cinema, painting and one’s own life experience to characterize one place with respect to another and load it with a multitude of meanings and symbols that concur in creating its exclusivity and defining its spirit, soul and identity, based on the motley variables that constitute a person, and consequently his or her relationship with the place itself.

THE DIGITAL ERA SEEMED TO HAVE PROMOTED THE CREATION OF WHAT EXPERTS CALL “NON-PLACES”, meaning a phenomenon that leads to the loss of identity of all places – a process characterizing post-modern, metropolitan, globalized society¹ – and also, applying the same term arbitrarily, signifying the trend that concretely distances us from real places in order to concentrate our activities in places that are increasingly more often only virtual. In reality, latest-generation digital techniques and simultaneously developed location-based applications have promoted places to veritable protagonists, interactive and real media capable of communicating information beyond the data connected to their functional characteristics, increasingly playing on the emotional sphere. Of course, marketing could not remain oblivious to these dynamics!

THE SCENARIO HAS CHANGED IN THE COURSE OF THE LAST FEW YEARS AND IT WILL EVOLVE FURTHER IN THE NEAR FUTURE. Since the crowdedness of the most evolved and competitive markets forces us to discover and use new spaces for communication in the quest for utmost visibility, someone must have had a great idea: why not “re-inhabit” abandoned spaces, making them attractive again and more captivating for our targets!? And so marketing realized the potential of places as new media and as communication territories where brands can enter into direct and dynamic contact with consumers. And all the while, of course, exploiting the same digital techniques that seemed to have excluded them from the game. Places are experiencing another chance and, as if anxious to resume their place in our lives, they rapture us with all their charm – generally an induced and not a 100% natural charm – unveiling themselves in an attempt to leave a mark in our souls and to never again be forgotten.

IT IS SAID THAT A PLACE CAN BE DEFINED AS SUCH WHEN IT HAS A STORY TO TELL. Marketing can become a spokesperson for these stories, building a structured project comprised of a series of specially planned activities that allow it to tell us “what is” this place and reveal its secrets to us so that it can come back to life through our induced participation (whether this consists in daily routine activities or others such as contests, promotions and interactive games). It is here that digital technology is useful and becomes the best instrument capable of giving real places the possibility of new life. This is the “poetic” vision of place marketing that has become very popular in the last few months among the different promotional and incentive actions, building its bases on more structured activities such

as territorial marketing, geo-marketing and proximity marketing. But since we know that marketing behaves like an exact science, it is clear that nothing is done by chance or for pure sentimentalism, but rather in order to attain a clear objective by following a certain plan.

THE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES that travel, for example, on latest-generation telephones that are always within reach, have easily allowed highlighting the importance of “where” and hence of the place.

The functionalities of Geo Social Networks like Foursquare, Gowalla and the latest-born Facebook Place are becoming increasingly popular with users, and their followers can obtain simple answers on “what it is they have in front of them”, “what’s going on in the area” or “what’s there to buy within a few meter radius”, “where can we go to eat” and “who, among their friends, is in the same area and available to meet” in just a few seconds. In this case, technology becomes a friend of reality: real things to see and to discover, real persons, nearby, to visit; it is evident that these opportunities are suggested to us in such a simple and banal way that they can inevitably be exploited quickly and easily. On its home page, Foursquare says that it “Offers you and your friends a new way to explore the city”. Gowalla states “Keep up with friends, highlight your favorite places and discover the world around you.” Facebook Place promotes itself by saying: “Who. What. When. And now Where.” With a mobile phone in our hands we no longer need a tourist guide, nor to ask for the nearest parking space, nor to have someone suggest a quaint little restaurant for a meal: all we have to do is connect and we can get these answers and lots more.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THESE INTERFACES CAPABLE OF PUTTING PEOPLE IN RELATION WITH PLACES AND BRANDS, with products or with companies undertaking this type of activity, allows the latter to reserve a place for themselves in a very special showcase that in one unique moment promotes them and the place hosting them, associating these with a positive sensation for the user. Real places become “interactive media” through a process that suggests inevitable new relationships with marketing, design, the creation of events and the handling of emotions. Through these technologies, places take on new life; they populate and become interesting communicational devices from the point of view of promotion and visibility. They intercept flows of people, orient them and involve them through stimuli and allures of various nature and efficacy... A veritable rebirth! •

Practical examples.

Let’s whet the minds of creatives and non-creatives because, like a large part of latest-generation instruments, applications of this type are many and the opportunities are not always very evident.

Some places have clear potential.

1. Crowded New York City is a perfect promotional location. NBC, for example, brilliantly collaborated with the city’s Department of Parks & Recreation in a very special launch and promotional campaign for a new TV series – The Cape (launched in the USA in January 2011) – that speaks about a former police officer who has fallen out of favor and re-invents himself a masked sentinel of the city, taking inspiration from his son’s favorite superhero. The statues of the thirty “heroes” – important historical characters disseminated throughout the city, among which that of George Washington in Union Square Park and William Shakespeare in Central Park – were covered in a cloak and placed next to a small promotional-informative totem highlighting their heroic gestures in an analogy with the show’s protagonist. The audience was allowed to discover who these characters were and to get to know them better and, by participating, they would also discover something more about the new series. The users of the net could check the city map, find the position of the statues and participate in the contest through Twitter or Foursquare to win a “hero’s” prize signed by The Cape and NBC. Promoting any product/service through Foursquare is not always simple; there must be a connection with the concept of “location” and the identification of positions to check. In this case, our compliments go to NBC for this creative idea that has not only promoted their TV series by generating curiosity and interest, but also allowed many users to discover which characters were cached behind the cloak, rediscovering statues and squares – an opportunity certainly seized by local authorities who enthusiastically supported the initiative.

2. Italy is another prime example. A creative laboratory involved in publishing, specialized in rethinking contents, formats and editorial models in a digital key, has developed a product that exploits the concepts of “location”, uniting them with lucid aspects and with the love of history and the beauty of the places surrounding us. A product capable of inventing a new way to explore cities, at the disposal of Agencies and Offices interested in re-evaluating places and locations, telling real and invented stories and diffusing their image, involving their targets. The WHAIWHAI guide is the format dedicated to a non-conventional visit of places; a paper guide that – supported by latest-generation digital techniques – guarantees a unique adventure, stage after stage. Ad-hoc products

can be made with stories and places to discover, in-line with strategic objectives: the place becomes protagonist of internal or external communication events or of team building, of activities together with children and students, of promotional activity by the public administration. These guides, in-line with our “place marketing theory”, allow living a veritable adventure, transmitting emotions and information through the formula of a game, bringing people to get to know and love places and cities through the discovery of stories and enigmas in a treasure hunt of the new millennium capable of totally engrossing them, leaving them with enduring impressions and memories.