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Sponsor The User

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AT THE RISK OF REVEALING too much about my media-addicted ways and permanently embarrassing my family, I will say that I'm the kind of guy who reaches for the remote in movie theaters. When that bridge in Spielberg's "War of the Worlds" blows to hell and death rays start vaporizing suburbanites, my reflex is to hit rewind, no matter where I am.

"What are you doing?" my partner asks as I start to fidget.

"Nothing," I answer, as the impulse fades into the cold realization that I am strapped into one of those old fashioned, lean-back entertainment experiences that satisfied generations of passive audiences that preceded me.

I am spoiled, and I admit it, but I suspect so are the rest of you. Interactivity is more than a feature of modern life. I think it is bound to become a reflex. Ultimately we start to assume that all media are or should have some back channel.

This a reflex that is tailormade for mobile. I am struck again and again by the response rates marketers like HipCricket and Vibes Media report from their in-venue SMS/MMS programs at concerts and sporting events.

For instance, at a KIIS Los Angeles concert last May 15,000 attendees produced 7,672 shout-outs and messages to the texting screens in the venue. And when presented with an offer to upgrade their seats, concert-goers sent 10,550 messages, according to HipCricket, which managed the mobile piece of the event. At another concert several weeks ago, a 10,000-member audience produced more than 13,000 messages and more than 8,000 upgrade requests.

Jeff Hasen, HipCricket's chief marketing officer, says it is all about the offer and the venue. "In live arenas so much of the phone is personalization and people get into throwing a photo up. It makes it more enjoyable." And simply by sponsoring the screen on which the exchanges take place, a brand is doing what the user wants, facilitating one-to-one communication rather than interrupting it. The neatest trick of mobile media is going to be finding ways for marketing to be present at the site of peer-to-peer communication without getting in the way. Facilitating conversations is the best promotional opportunity of all.

This is just the simple rule of marketing – adding value rather than detracting from an experience. The offer of a seat upgrade in a venue speaks directly to an immediate desire on the part of the user to enhance her experience.

Not every marketer has the allure of a seat upgrade to offer users, but there is an important lesson in this. Perhaps we should be thinking less about sponsoring events or content, and more about sponsoring users. How can a brand enhance and extend an experience that a user is already enjoying? That may be the real question that a personalized interactivity tool like the phone demands. Because mobile phones are totally portable, perhaps marketers have to stop thinking about media placement – how and where to wrap their messages around content – and start thinking situationally. Where is my user at a given point in time, and how can my brand enhance the value of that moment? How can I sponsor the user in his or her world? How can I help them activate the interactive reflex at any given moment? In-venue mobile marketing is a wonderful example of the power of mobile, but I think we should be extrapolating its lessons elsewhere.

There is a real opportunity for mobile to change the game of marketing, to move from interruptive promotion to real partnership with customers. If the rest of you are anything like me (God help you), then at any given moment in the day you may find yourself reaching for the remote trying to exercise that newfound interactive reflex. Brands should be there to help me activate that moment.

If users are "in charge," as we like to say, then shouldn't we be sponsoring them?

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