

Arrowheads and Avatars

A few years ago, two University of Wyoming professors began questioning the purpose of ancient arrowheads. They partnered with Jamie Hyneman and Adam Savage of the show “MythBusters” to conduct ballistic tests on these pointy pieces of rock and determine what, specifically, made them so desirable to our prehistoric ancestors. After all, according to Hyneman and Savage’s findings, it would have taken 10 times more work to fashion the triangular projectiles than carving comparably basic wooden spears. After a battery of tests, the conclusion was crystal clear: Contrary to popular belief, arrowheads do not offer greater efficiency or accuracy than simple sharpened sticks.

So why is the earth littered with these implements? Why did Stone Age man exert the energy to chip rocks to a point? The MythBusters’ explanation sounds as plausible as any I’ve encountered: Arrowheads were the technology de jour — the iPhones and tablet PCs of a bygone era. Who dared to hunt with sticks, when the Stone Age Jones’s were waving their new pointy, polished arrowheads in everyone’s face?

But what do ancient arrowheads have to do with modern marketing? A lot, in fact, especially during healthier economic times. According to our Marketing Technology Survey, fielded in 2010, 82 percent of exhibit managers are incorporating technology into their marketing efforts, ranging from simple touchscreen kiosks to complex applications of augmented reality.



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In other words, they’re adopting the arrowheads of our industry.

Now don’t get me wrong, many of the marketing-related technologies available to exhibitors offer significant advances in lead tracking, measurement, attendee engagement, and more. Our arrowheads are indeed more desirable than wooden spears. But that’s just icing on the cake. The truth is, our industry will continue to adopt myriad technologies because humans are hardwired to covet and eventually acquire the next big thing.

Strategic marketers like to pretend they’re immune to the adoption of technology for the sake of technology, but most have gone to their exhibit houses and designers at one time or another with the exact same desire: an exhibit with “wow factor.” That’s the more commonly accepted way of saying you want the coolest, sexiest, most cutting-edge exhibit you can afford, regardless of whether or not those nonessential, high-tech booth baubles achieve a single objective beyond catching attendees’ attention, differentiating your space on the show floor, and making you the newest member of that arrow-wielding

Jones clan. And there’s not a damn thing wrong with that, despite the fact that we’ve been brainwashed into shunning that kind of thinking.

I believe our collective bias against tech for tech’s sake can be traced, in part, back to the recessionary rewiring of our brains between mid 2008 and late 2009. During that timeframe, we were conditioned to believe that if something’s not essential, it’s superfluous. But that’s not necessarily true. When we asked which objectives exhibitors felt technology has helped them achieve, we found 11 different responses all cited by at least 10 percent of marketers. They ranged from “increased length of booth visit” to “increased brand awareness.” But what we failed to add as a legitimate and respectable multiple-choice option was “it made my exhibit sexy.”

Bottom line, the relentless pursuit of technology is coded into our DNA. It goes back hundreds of thousands of years. So don’t be ashamed to covet that wow factor, and invest the time and money to sharpen your exhibit’s arrowheads a little. Evolution is inevitable, and extinction by way of irrelevance is an ugly and unfortunate end — kind of like the last Dodo bird, which, I believe, was felled by a perfectly pointed arrowhead. **E**

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