

How to Sell Experiences

By [Karen E. Klein](#) November 18, 2014



Courtesy Painting With a Twist

[Republic Bike](#) has involved clients in designing the bicycles they order since it opened in 2008. A growing number of customers don't want just to order bespoke bikes; they want to learn how to build them as well. Republic's corporate and nonprofit clients are asking for hands-on workshops. Universities have hosted bike-building sessions for students, and an architecture firm recently held a bike design day for its employees.

“Companies see this as a joyful experience for their employees,” says Avery Pack, owner of the Dania Beach (Fla.) business that has sold custom bikes to Google([GOOG](#)) and TV's *Portlandia* (“loaded with opportunities for smug self-satisfaction”).

Businesses that used to just sell products are courting customers with classes, entertainment, and social experiences. Think cooking demonstrations at gourmet shops, fashion shows at boutiques, or workshops at the Apple ([AAPL](#)) Store. “Consumers are increasingly responding to blended retail and entertainment experiences,” says Fred Thompson, retail practice leader at marketing company [LoyaltyOne](#).

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Courtesy Republic Bike

But mashing up product and service models isn't easy to pull off profitably. Pricing and timing must be fine-tuned, and the experience needs to be compelling enough to attract repeat customers. “The most overlooked aspect of these benefits tends to be the follow-up. It's important for a business to reinforce the experience with follow-up information and offers to help reinforce the training customers have received,” Thompson says.

It's a good way to attract young adults. “Millennials in particular are responding well to these enhanced shopping and recreational experiences. Businesses looking to engage these customers should consider crafting a hands-on shopping experience with a consultant or expert in the field,” he says.

One model of selling experiences that seems to be taking off: “paint-and-sip” outlets that are part art lesson, part cocktail party. Two such businesses recently made the list of top new franchise concepts published by industry journal *Franchise Business Review*, for instance.

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Mike Powers is managing director of [Painting with a Twist](#), a paint-and-sip franchise that has expanded to 190 stores since opening in 2007. He says millennials make up about 35 percent of its clientele. It’s a social experience that lets them bond with friends offline. “The No. 1 reason people come to us is to enjoy time with their friends. It’s not because they want another painting or to explore their creative side,” Powers says.



Because the company was founded during the recession, setting the right price point was crucial. A two-hour session, including supplies and instruction, costs \$35. Customers bring their own wine and snacks. “We find that studios in depressed areas are really thriving—in places where people need to escape for a few hours and feel good,” Powers says.

Finding and training the right instructors—artists who don’t intimidate amateurs but can help students produce a decent-looking painting—is also important. “It’s fun art, not fine art,” is the company motto.

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Powers surveys clients frequently and pays attention to every detail in an effort to fine-tune the experience, from selecting music playlists to making sure each customer is personally greeted and providing free coffee, which gives the class a welcoming aroma.

Keeping the sessions fresh and exciting is a must, Powers says, both to get customers to spread the word about the business and to differentiate from competitors. “We started in 2007. Now we’ve got 10 companies copying everything we do,” Powers says. “We have to continue to evolve and never let the experience become a routine thing.”