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# How to t.h.e.m.e. your bank

“Work is theatre and every business a stage” is what authors B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore tell us in their book *The Experience Economy*. It may sound like a metaphor, but in the world of business and experiences, it is not.

Every business is a stage for your product offering, and your staff are the performers that engage customers in motivating them to buy what you offer. Goods and signage are staged and displayed as props and backdrops for your business. These actions are what supports the idea that work is theatre, and like all good theatre productions, your work needs to have a theme to set yourself apart from others in your industry.



**Themes are a way of identifying the uniqueness of what you do—to separate it from other similar events or activities.**

“Under the Sea” dances, retro drive-in diners, an Italian restaurant, and even many sport championship parties are themed events. Themes, in the general sense, help guide the sensory cues and activities related to the theme and establish any aesthetic details of the

surroundings.

Theming can help communicate to a visitor, guest, and customer a story behind the environment and a purpose for the interaction. Themes may be a good way to establish the concept but may not always be the end solution to providing a true economic experience. Some business that rely on a theme solely to drive their business soon fall from favor of customers.



### **Don't become the Rainforest Café of banking.**

Recall some of the classically themed businesses that now struggle because they rely on the theming rather than using the theme as the guiding concept. Look at the Rainforest Café. Even though the theme is very predominant, the engagement lacks individual customization and staff is not scripted around the theme. It is a merely a restaurant in a fake rainforest. It was entertaining the first few times, but its charm soon waned for repeat customers because it never changed and eventually became a distraction when dining.

Another prime example of missing the mark is Niketown. The name expresses that it was an active environment around Nike and sports. After a short time, all interactive experiences were halted and Nike relied on the idea of sports through visual cues. But customers could not interact with the staged environment. It was a sports theme that lacked any sports activities.



A wonderful example of a theme as a guiding principle is the Library Hotel in New York. Its theme is the Dewey Decimal system. Each floor is assigned a different category, and each room is a different book. Even the lobby hosts a huge selection of books and mimics that of a classic library. Here, the theme dictates more than just the environment or décor. It also defines the attitudes of the staff, the underlying story, and how all five senses will be engaged.

### **So how can a bank leverage theming to set itself apart from the competition?**

Just as importantly, how can it avoid relying on the theme to *be* the business?

One way is to see the word THEME as an acronym for a systematic approach to employing theme properly and effectively.

#### **T. – Theme the experience.**

Define a theme that will guide your design, props, product packaging, staff scripts, and marketing messages. The theme can be obvious and bold or can be subtle and subdued. No matter the level of awareness, a theme helps frame all interactions and staging.

#### **H. – Harmonize impressions with positive cues.**

Avoid mixing content, messages, and even environmental elements that clash with your theme. Only use those elements that complement the theme and your business intent. If your bank wishes to leverage a nautical theme, then use color, details, shapes, and even imagery that reflect and support the overall theme you choose. Imagine your door handles as brass corded rope or door windows as round to represent portholes without overdoing the idea.

## **E. – Eliminate negative cues.**

Avoid mixing in cues and details that do not relate to the underlying theme. Cues that do not harmonize with the theme create conflict, and eventually confuse the customer. Other negative cues that should be removed are those that degrade the environment—like taped-on signs, scraps of paper lying about, or even staff outfits that don't distinguish them from customers. If it does not support the theme, remove it.

## **M. – Mix in memorabilia.**

Mix in items that remind customers of their visit or interaction with your business. These are memory cues to their experience. Memorabilia can also be conversation triggers for others who interact with your customers. Again, the memorabilia you choose still must be harmonized with the theme being presented. Playing on the nautical theme, a small token could include shells with your logo or a document clip for wealth management papers that have a small life preserver attached. You could even use those little round candies as treats for kids.

## **E. – Engage all five senses.**

Finally, you must engage all five senses to truly embed the experience in the minds of the customer. Every strong experience stager understands that an experience is engaged on multiple levels and can be a great reinforcement to the customer's memory.

One of the most important sense is of smell. Smell is the most powerful and direct link to our memory and is the least leveraged. Scent machines can create custom fragrances, or signature scents, that can become an aroma logo to your business.

## **The benefits of T.H.E.M.E.-ing.**

By leveraging a defined theme and using T.H.E.M.E as the guiding framework, a bank can focus its delivery, control its messages, and clearly understand which elements are needed in customer engaged environments—physical or even digital.

A theme also enhances the experience that is staged for a customer through all of the senses.

Themes can also be unique to each location to add a sense of community or to establish a style of the brand. A great example of this is Kimpton Boutique Hotels, which provides unique themes for each location yet embraces an overall corporate brand as part of a larger idea. For Kimpton Boutique Hotels, each location defines itself to its environment and identifies its unique offering in each city.

Just as your brand identifies you in your communications, theming can help embed that brand at each visit through the staff interactions, the environment, and the scripted messages of your bank. Theming can make a statement and establish you as being different and unique in a sea of competitors and create a place that customers want to come and do business.

### **About Kevin Dulle, CEEE**

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*Kevin M. Dulle, Certified Experience Economy Expert (CEEE), is Director of the Experience Innovations Strategy Team at NewGround, an experiential design build firm. He has spent over 25 years serving the financial industry with strategic planning, visual thinking, and experiential business development. With visual translations and graphic thinking techniques, Kevin guides clients in discovering unique strategic solutions, develop long-term planning options and organize complex concepts into cohesive strategies.*