



The proof is in the activation

How global campaigns become real, locally

Intro

We've all become very good at making campaigns. They're sharp, they travel well, and they look good almost everywhere. But for all that consistency, they don't always work where it matters most. Somewhere between the global idea and the real world, something gets lost. Not in the strategy, and not even in the creativity, but in the translation.

We've quietly moved into what you could call a proof economy. People don't really take brands at their word anymore. They look for signals, confirmations, something that feels grounded in reality. It's less about what you say and more about what you do.



We've moved
into a proof
economy.



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The data supports it. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, 73% of consumers say they trust brands that actively and authentically show up in local culture. At the same time, the fastest-growing channels are those closest to real-life interaction: retail media, experiential, and anything that brings brands into contact with actual behaviour.

Belief is moving closer to reality.
And that puts pressure on activation.



Chapter 1

Campaigns aren't always built for reality.

Campaigns are built for control. You define the message, create the assets, and scale them across markets. Everything behaves. Activation doesn't. It happens in the real world, where context shifts and control fades quickly. That creates a gap. We optimise for visibility, but conversion happens in context, at the moment someone actually interacts with the brand. POPAI research shows that around 70% of FMCG purchase decisions are made at the shelf. Which means a lot of marketing never quite reaches the place where behaviour happens.



70% of FMCG purchase decisions are made at the shelf.

Takeaway

Campaigns create potential.
Activation is where that
potential meets reality.



And when brands do step into reality, they don't always hold the narrative.

Take the Mile in my shoes, an immersive installation by the Empathy Museum where visitors listen to real-life stories while literally walking in someone else's shoes to experience empathy first hand.

The global refugee crisis feels distant, abstract, and easily ignored on screen. But by bringing their difficult and often grueling reality directly into people's lives, the activation forced locals to experience the physical toll firsthand. The awareness worked because the local reality hit home. When activation is rooted in a real human experience, brands can create relevance that travels far beyond the campaign itself.

Chapter 2

The bit in the middle
where things break.

The biggest issue isn't the campaign. It's what happens after. Ideas get handed over, toolkits are shared, guidelines applied. On paper, everything is aligned. In reality, something gets diluted. Not because people aren't capable, but because no one truly owns the translation.

That's the missing layer: local ownership. Without it, activation becomes generic, safe and interchangeable. The idea remains, but its edge disappears.



Kantar's media effectiveness studies highlight this implementation gap. While more than 90% of marketers agree local adaptation is critical, only 37% say they successfully act on real-time local insights. Most impact is lost somewhere between strategy and execution. The brands that get this right don't simply distribute ideas. They allow them to be reinterpreted.

Take McDonald's across Europe. The platform stays consistent, but activations are rooted in local behaviour, from menu hacks to culturally specific in-store and outdoor moments. It doesn't feel adapted. It feels native. The difference is simple. One applies a campaign. The other interprets it.

Takeaway

Activation needs ownership. Without it, even the best ideas flatten out.



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Chapter 3

People don't believe campaigns anymore.

People still see campaigns. They recognise them. But belief doesn't come from seeing. It comes from experiencing. We've moved from attention to validation. From messaging to proof. And investment is following that shift. Retail media continues to grow because it sits closer to the moment of decision. Participatory experiences consistently outperform passive exposure in both engagement and recall.

The reason is simple. If people can experience something for themselves, they no longer need to take a brand's word for it. But proof doesn't happen by accident. It has to be designed into the experience. At some point, every idea leaves the slide. And that's where it either works or doesn't.



Designing for activation means starting from behaviour. Not what we want to say, but what we want people to actually do, feel or step into. You stop thinking in assets and start thinking in moments.

LEGO takes this approach brilliantly. By opening a simple pop-up flower shop on the high street, they turned a local activation into a global story. The idea was tangible, shareable and impossible to experience passively. The activation became the campaign.

That's the real test. Not how well an idea presents, but how well it survives contact with reality.



Takeaway

If people can't experience it,
they won't fully believe it.

Chapter 4

Activation isn't the end, it's the system

Activation is often treated as the final step. The campaign is built first and activation is added later. By then, most decisions are already locked.

The brands that outperform reverse the process. They build activation into the idea from the start. Not as a format, but as a system. A system based on clear intent that can flex locally.





Jupiler does this well. Football is the anchor, but the way the brand shows up changes constantly with the energy of the moment. Major tournaments, local matches, bar culture and fan rituals all become opportunities for activation. The expression evolves, but the role Jupiler plays remains consistent.

This is the shift. Not consistency of execution, but consistency of intent.

Takeaway

If activation isn't designed into the idea, it will always feel like an afterthought.

Chapter 5

Great activation
doesn't need a big budget

One of the biggest misconceptions about activation is that it needs scale.

Global campaigns often arrive locally with smaller budgets, tighter timelines and fewer production options. But strong activation isn't about spending more. It's about understanding context better.



Take the recent marathon activations from Burger King UK. In London, “Whopper of a Finish” celebrated the reward waiting after the race. In Belgium, Burger King encouraged exhausted runners that go a little further with a free burger.

A local and specific cultural interpretation of a larger brand strategy without the need for a huge budget. Its strength came from how precisely it connected to local behaviour and mindset. The smartest campaigns aren’t just creatively scalable. They’re economically scalable too.

Takeaway

The best activations don’t spend harder.
They land better.



Campaigns get
you seen.

Activation gets
you believed.

And right now,
belief is what
drives everything
that follows.

If you have any questions
or would like to discuss
potential collaborations,
feel free to contact our
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clarity beats noise