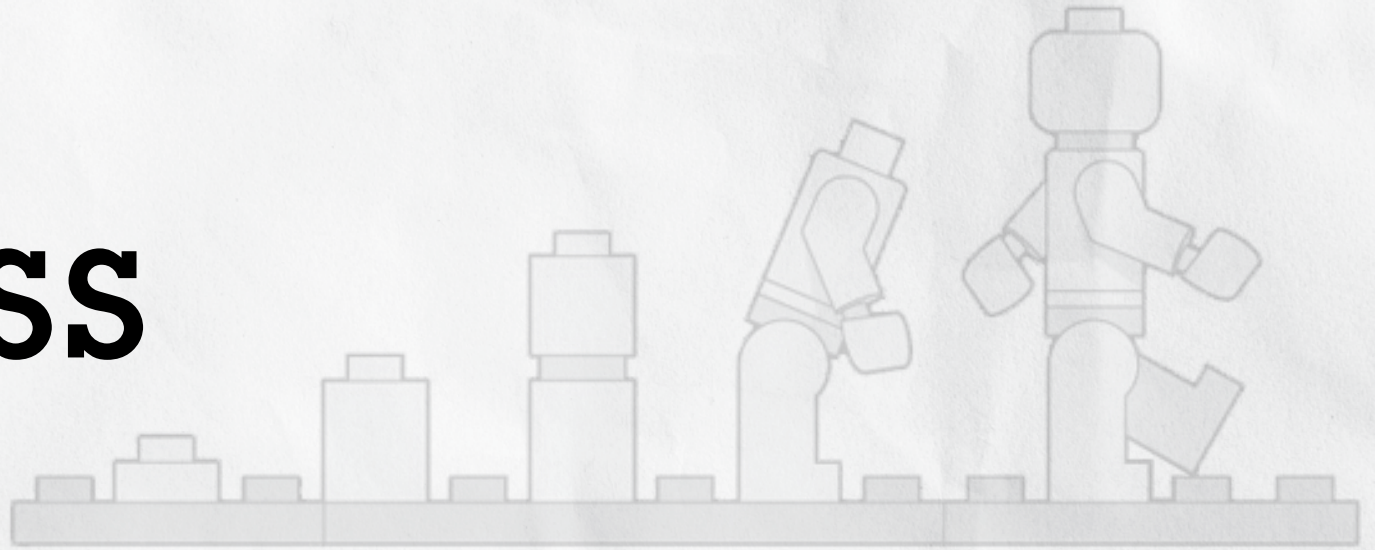


# The serious business of play



*‘Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money... In spite of this, or because of it, play constitutes an essential element of human social and spiritual development.’*

– Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 1961

## HUMAN BEINGS PLAY. IT'S WHAT WE DO.

Not just for entertainment, but as a way to explore, learn, experiment and communicate. Yes, play is silly and ephemeral. But it's also a vital part of being human. At FITCH, we believe this makes it an enormously powerful tool for brands.

This isn't just our own whimsical notion. Academics like French philosopher and sociologist Roger Caillois, quoted above, and Donald Brown, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, agree. In *Human Universals*, Brown identifies play as one of the things all people do, regardless of geography, culture or time. We use it, he says, 'to perfect skill and create mastery.'

But not in business, surely? No, no. Business is serious, grown-up stuff. It's about spreadsheets and Blackberries, not toys and games.

Well, someone forgot to tell Google. The engineers at its Zurich offices have meetings in multi-coloured igloos and take breaks in a bath of red foam. They even get to their cafeteria on a silver slide. Staff are also allowed to spend 20% of their working week on their own projects – they get to play at work.

Are they just being silly? Or is a multi-billion-dollar technology business likely to take its R&D environment pretty seriously? Those offices may look zany, but they're all about fostering innovation and collaboration. As Mario Queiroz, Google's vice president of product management, says: 'Beyond the good food and cool office ... every conversation that you have here is one of substance.'



Google Offices, Zurich



Red Bull Offices, London

## VOLUPTUOUS PANIC

Red Bull's London HQ has a slide, too. Something's happening here. When you slide, you're out of control – but safely so. It's a liberating sensation.

Caillois described it as 'a voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind,' which inspired artist Carsten Höller to install Test Site – a vast helter-skelter – at London's Tate Modern. Höller asked, 'What would be the result of sliding, if it was part of the daily routine?' Well, in the offices of some very serious businesses, it already is. Why? And what does it mean?

Slides are the epitome of play: pointless, daft, and undeniably delightful. You're loosened up and energised. You look a bit silly too, which is probably no bad thing: it's hard to be pompous on a slide.

Twenty years ago, FITCH created a large helter-skelter at the main entrance to the new Children's World store for Boots. In those days it was for kids only: adults were still pretending they were too serious and goal-oriented for such frivolity. Today, our guess is you'd find many grown-ups elbowing past the children for a go on the slide.



Lego Brandstore

## PLAY WELL – LEARN WELL

A particular client of FITCH has always understood the value of play. Lego's brand name is taken from the Danish phrase 'leg godt' – 'play well.' (Which by remarkable coincidence is also Latin for 'I put together'.)

The company's founder, Ole Kirk Christiansen, says play 'stimulates the imagination, the emergence of ideas, and

creative expression.' Not just for children, but for the grown-ups they'll become. 'Play Well' was the key principle behind FITCH's concept for the current generation of Lego stores. By reducing product facings to make room for play space, we actually increased sales. We also turned the entire back wall into a pick-a-brick experience, where you buy Lego by the scoopful.

## PLAY TIME

In the 1940s, families would play together: they'd gather for parlour games, board games and cards. But as the Fifties approached, a new invention changed everything. No, not TV. Central heating.

Suddenly, the living room wasn't the only cosy place in the house. Children discovered the luxury of solitary play. They discovered dolls, train sets, Lego and, later, video games.

Communal play seemed pretty archaic until another innovation – Nintendo's Wii – reunited the family in the living room. It's tactile: the controllers are fun to grab and play with. It's also social: it's all about having fun together. Today, the Wii is the gadget that 'makes us most happy,' according to a survey by The Gadget Helpline. People love play – and it seems every generation is embracing it.



## PLAYING SHOPS

The delight in tactile play that makes us love the Wii has serious implications for brands and retailers. As a study at Ohio State University showed, playing with products creates a powerful attachment.

This attachment has serious commercial potential. The study showed that people who handled a coffee mug for 30 seconds would pay significantly more for it than those who held it for just 10 seconds. If that's true of a humble mug, how much stronger would the attachment be to something that was really fun to play with?



Nintendo Wii Controller



Nike Trial Van

## THE RISE OF THE 'TRYSUMER'

You could well argue that consumer 'play' has been around for decades, in the form of trial: test-driving cars, listening to albums in a music store, swinging golf clubs in store, or just sampling cheese and bread in the supermarket.

Today, we see signs of a new generation of consumers, who want to test things out – to play with them – before they buy. Trendwatching, the independent trend monitoring group, calls them 'Trysumers.'

As the Ohio State study showed, this has advantages for brands, too. As many have been quick to realise. In 2006, the Nike Trial Van offered the chance to try out Nike shoes. Staff gave out water and running advice, but weren't allowed to sell

shoes. It was all about a greater sense of involvement.

In Tokyo, SampleLab goes further. For a small subscription, you get access to the 'store,' where you can try a host of different products. It's fun, and there's the buzz of 'special access.' For brands, it brings invaluable feedback, and precious word-of-mouth.

Similarly, the website Avelle (formerly Bag Borrow or Steal) allows mere mortals to 'borrow' (basically, hire) the most sumptuous designer luxuries – from handbags to watches and jewellery. Consumers get to try out products they might never be able to otherwise, while the brands get a boost in exposure.

## PLAY COMES OF AGE

New generations are turning away from the blunt satisfactions and process of ownership. They're looking for meaningful experiences. They want to do more of what they like, and less of what they have to do. They want to have more fun. We have seen three current trends fuelling this.



### **Trend 1: Self-enrichment**

Today, people are looking for personally enriching experiences that satisfy on a deeper level. London's School of Life offers fun educational experiences like an Isle of Wight 'holiday' with a star photographer and classes on philosophy. A 2008 Mintel report showed that adventure holidays now outperform the rest of the travel market, as 'consumers focus upon entertainment and self-improvement as much as materialism.'



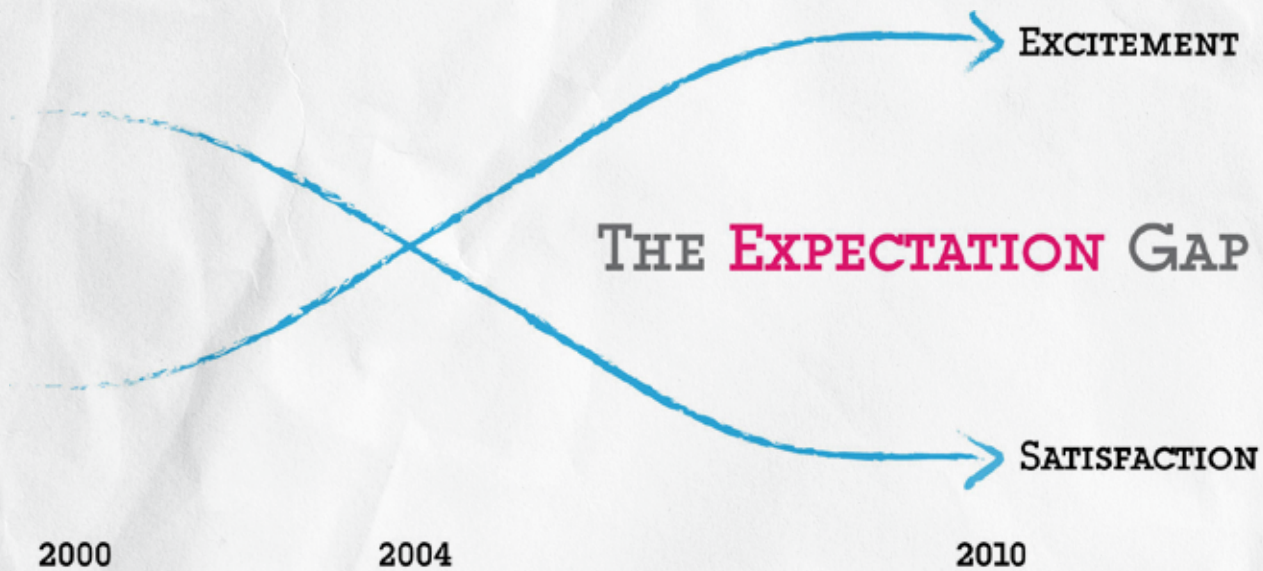
### **Trend 2: Bleisure**

How times have changed. The '80s were all about competitive advantage: tough, left-brain stuff. In the '90s, we developed the right-brain 'knowledge economy.' Now, as we enter the second decade of the new millennium, we're discovering the potential of whole-brain thinking. We're combining work with play and creativity. Business can be leisure, and vice-versa.



### **Trend 3: The Slash Slash Generation**

These are do-it-all teenage and 20-something 'culturepreneurs,' empowered by digital media to create multiple careers for themselves. (Hence the name, as in DJ/designer/photographer.) They're redefining the interaction between brand and consumer by seeking out brands they can co-create with, not simply consume.



## THE EXPECTATION GAP

All these trends have serious potential for brands. But there's another, less positive factor at work: the widening gap between consumers' expectations of ever-more sophisticated products, and the actual service they experience from brands.

Mobile phones are a prime example. In 2003, a typical device offered five functions. Five years later, it had increased to 21 functions. Even so, the J.D. Power survey of Retail Sales Satisfaction in 2008 found that: 'Overall customer satisfaction with retail service has steadily declined ... as products and services have evolved in complexity.'

Since smartphones really took off around 2004, product expectations have soared, but satisfaction with mobile services has plummeted. Addressing that gap means re-engaging with consumers. A playful approach in the language brands use, and the environments they create, can make a critical difference.



Rock Radio, Scotland & Manchester

## THE LANGUAGE OF PLAY

Many brands are discovering the connective power of humour and play, and consumers' attraction towards brands that communicate with wit and personality.

In the UK, for example, radio station Rock Radio put empty guitar racks on the street with a sign that read, 'Free air guitar. Please take one.' Suddenly we're sharing a joke with the brand, not simply being fed a message. That's a much more personal, and powerful, relationship.



Asian Paints, Mumbai



## PLAY IN ITS PLACE

Why must every store be essentially a rank of products with a cash register at the end? If products can be seen as toys, can't stores be playgrounds?

For Asian Paints in India, Fitch created a 'Color Store' where consumers can learn, explore and experiment with colour for their home. A 'colour chef' will prepare a customized palette for you, while interactive displays offer inspiration on lighting and decoration. The 'store' doesn't actually sell anything. But sales of paint in the the brand's surrounding stores have increased significantly thanks to this 'colour' playground.

Brands like these have discovered that retail environments are a perfect opportunity to show customers a good time, and create a service that starts to match their expectations.

## THE WORLD OF PLAY

We've identified three core 'territories' of play, which also relate to different groups of consumers worldwide.

In the most developed economies, confident consumers interact imaginatively with brands. They look for immersive brand worlds, and tools for self-expression. We call this Expressive play. British clothing company Howies, for instance, has built a community of like-minded consumers who

collaborate on products, meet at events and see the brand as an expression of their own values.

Where there's a more basic understanding of products and brands, consumers use play to explore and learn more. They love environments that let them play with and compare products, with expert support from staff. At MTM Hong Kong, you can create your own combinations of skincare products, with the help of specialist beauty consultants.

In emerging economies, people use Discovery play to learn about brands. Reassuring, expert support is central, while play and humour help encourage confidence and communication. Take the brilliantly simple Question Box, for example, from US non-profit Open Mind. People in rural communities can ask the wall-mounted unit any question they like, and a telephone operator finds the answer online – an irresistible 'plaything' with enormous value.

## HAPPINESS: THE ULTIMATE PRODUCT?

These days we hear a lot about consumers' quest for control and power; their search for meaning in a fractured world. All true, of course. But what about our need for spontaneity? What about making people happy? Isn't that really what everyone wants in the end?

# Is your brand making people happy?

*'When I was five years old, my mom always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down "Happy." They told me I didn't understand the assignment...*

*...I told them they didn't understand life.'*

– Anon.

### AT FITCH, OUR BELIEFS ABOUT PLAY COME DOWN TO THESE CORE IDEAS:

- 1** That play is fundamental to being human. So it's essential for brands to understand this if they are to connect with people.
- 2** That consumers have gone beyond the basic, materialistic desire for 'stuff.' They're seeking out richer, more rewarding, more enjoyable experiences.
- 3** That informality and play, enabling fun and interaction, engages consumers and can help forge powerful bonds with your brand.

If you would like to more information, please contact [tim.greenhalgh@fitch.com](mailto:tim.greenhalgh@fitch.com) or [robert.hocking@fitch.com](mailto:robert.hocking@fitch.com)