

PSYCHICS, TATTOOS AND A BIG EMPTY BOX

By Art Jackson

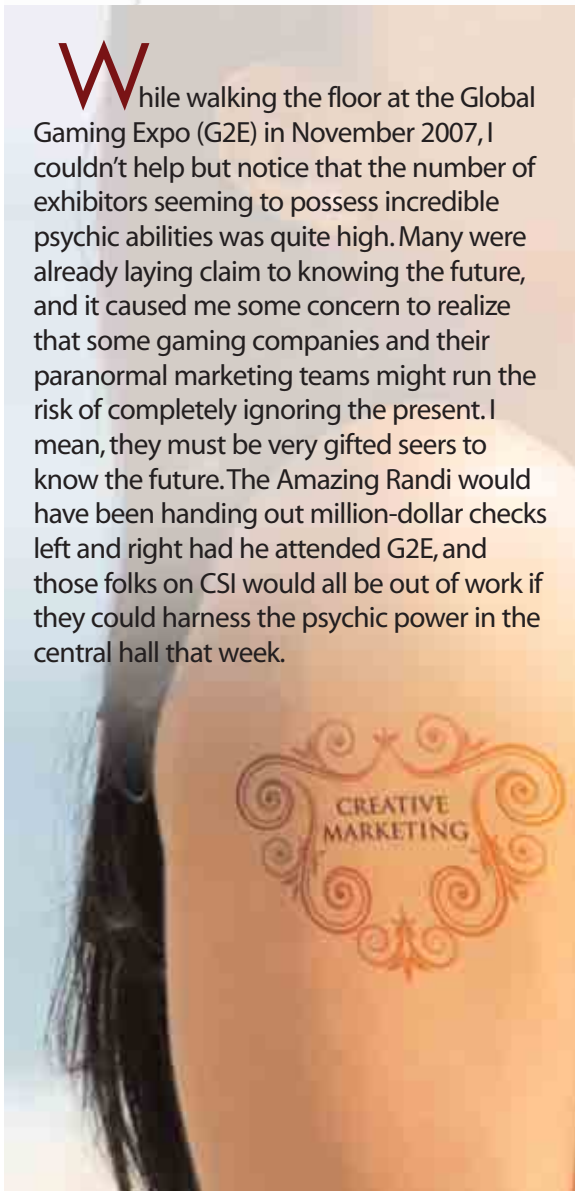
While walking the floor at the Global Gaming Expo (G2E) in November 2007, I couldn't help but notice that the number of exhibitors seeming to possess incredible psychic abilities was quite high. Many were already laying claim to knowing the future, and it caused me some concern to realize that some gaming companies and their paranormal marketing teams might run the risk of completely ignoring the present. I mean, they must be very gifted seers to know the future. The Amazing Randi would have been handing out million-dollar checks left and right had he attended G2E, and those folks on CSI would all be out of work if they could harness the psychic power in the central hall that week.

Need proof? I saw at least seven exhibitors who went through the time, effort and expense to create banners, signs and marketing literature proclaiming that *their* product was *the* product of the *future*. Wow! Knowing the future is pretty cool, and it just makes me glad that these clairvoyant marketers work for the gaming companies rather than wasting their lives as professional gamblers, getting rich and taking these companies for all they are worth. That would truly be an unfulfilling existence.

There were variations on the theme, but they all seemed fairly straight to the point and looked something like "The Future of ____" (you can fill in the blank). Luckily, I'm not a cynic and I take great comfort in knowing that these assertions are based on incredible psychic gifts rather than marketing laziness. It would be easy to say that certain gaming companies and their marketing agencies have grown lazy or indifferent, but anybody who would imply such a thing simply doesn't recognize amazing telepathic talent. You see, there's no need to be original or creative in your marketing when you *know* the future. I get it, and I'm impressed.

This does, however, raise an interesting question: Whom should I approach to shower with my admiration? The corporate executive under whose guidance these campaigns were produced? Or the marketing team in the proverbial trenches producing the actual product? I think I'll have to give credit where credit is due and applaud the executive. Let me explain.

Having worked in marketing for several different industries and having had to answer to executives who offered varying degrees of hands-on input, I have sensed a certain trend: I, the executive, know best. The implication is that marketing is not based on experience or skill, but is a universal talent possessed by all. I think that many marketing folks understand what I'm talking about and are probably nodding their heads in agreement while reading this, each with their own side-splitting story to tell. (Perhaps I should start a message board.) In truth, the executive is not the only guilty party in this scenario. Based on the advice I often receive, it seems that everybody is a marketing genius. From the mailroom guy to the salesman, from the shipping and receiving crew to security guards, everybody has an opinion that is so incredibly incredible, it simply must be shared.



Now, perhaps I'm naive, but when a certain task needs to be completed, I prefer to have it done by somebody with experience and a specific skill set associated with that task. If a pipe bursts under my sink, I like to call a plumber. If I have a brain aneurysm, I'd prefer to be operated on by a trained surgeon rather than my wonderful plumber, despite the fact that he has seen every episode of ER and thinks he has "a good handle on" the intricacies of brain surgery — although I do truly admire him for saving my flooding kitchen. Obviously, I am speaking in extremes, but it saves time.

I digress.

Back to our friends, the gaming execs. On the subject of marketing at tradeshow events, I'm pretty sure that the buck stops with them. I urge executives to seek the finest marketing teams they can and to resist their Napoleonic urges. Do the unthinkable: Trust your marketing team. Rely on their experience and knowledge as you would any other professional in any other industry. Comments I have personally heard, including "So, you make pretty pictures?" and "What's it like to work in a department that doesn't make any money?" are best left unsaid. Marketing is a skilled profession that deserves respect, although a powerful psychic's abilities may sometimes prove more attractive.

Another issue that might be of interest to gaming executives is the effect of poor marketing on the company pocketbook. The resources spent at tradeshow events are becoming astronomical, and it behooves every exhibitor to put its best foot forward and actually see a return on the investment. I realize that some see marketing as a necessary nuisance, but if you're going to shell out tens of thousands of dollars to exhibit, you might as well get something for your money. The value of the embryonic stages of an effective campaign should not be underestimated. Many of the themes and visuals displayed at G2E are actually the unveiling of what will become a company's marketing campaign for the following year. Starting off on the right foot is not only a feel-good morale booster, but it is fiscally responsible as well.

These costs are only part of the economic equation; the other is the potential of lost revenue. My father, a former professional Poker player, once told me, "The less you bet, the more you lose when you win."

This has stuck with me, morphing in my mind to, "The less bold you are initially, the more it will cost you down the road." In the simplest of terms, there are consequences to inaction, laziness and a lack of foresight — and they are going to cost you. It is imperative that the launch of a new marketing campaign be bold. Although I cannot quantify it except in the most general sense, I can assure you that the potential for lost revenue from a poorly developed campaign not only exists, but is happening every day.

So, what is effective? On the other end of the spectrum from the clairvoyant marketers at G2E, there was an onslaught of banners and graphics that showcased the present day "must have": the tattoo. The marketing team for Aristocrat Technologies is obviously a psychic-less bunch, solidly rooted in tapping into what's "now, hip and happening," rather than making valueless assertions about the future. (I say valueless only because they don't seem to have a Nostradamus on their team — don't worry, psychics, I still got your back.) The marketing scheme, sans knowledge of the future, was easily the most effective and memorable campaign unveiled at the show. Think about it. If I posed the question, "Which company cleverly used tattoos to create a memorable marketing campaign at G2E 2007?" I'm sure that anybody who attended could easily answer. If I asked, "Who is The Future of (insert product here)?" the average attendee simply wouldn't remember.

Aristocrat has done the unthinkable by relying on fundamental principles of marketing and adapting them in a most creative way. The idea of tapping into popular culture is a tried and true advertising tool that has permeated most segments of the marketing world, but seems to have been relegated to the branding of slot machines in the gaming

arena. I believe this is because so many marketing folks in the gaming industry talk incessantly about "thinking out of the box."

Apparently, someplace, somewhere, there is what must be a very large box that everybody in marketing is trying to "get out of" or "think out of." Now, I haven't seen this box, and I don't know why anybody would be thinking in it in the first place, but it must exist because *everybody* is talking about it. The best I can make out is that there must be something in the box that marketing teams want to leave behind. It can't be innovative marketing ideas, as those have been around long before this box arrived. So what could be so scary that everybody wants to get away from it? My fear is that the box is where the fundamentals of marketing are stored. It's unfortunate, but it sort of seems that way.

So, all you marketing folks and gaming executives, I can't wait to see what you have up your sleeves for NIGA. Remember, with every misstep there is a chance for redemption, and I'm looking forward to finding the next marketing campaign that will really knock my socks off. I'll tell you this: If I can't find anything, I'm going to track down a marketing psychic who can tell me once and for all exactly what's in that box.



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