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## Brand Experience opens up playroom

### Marketers toy with high-tech concepts in Lab

By MATTHEW CREAMER

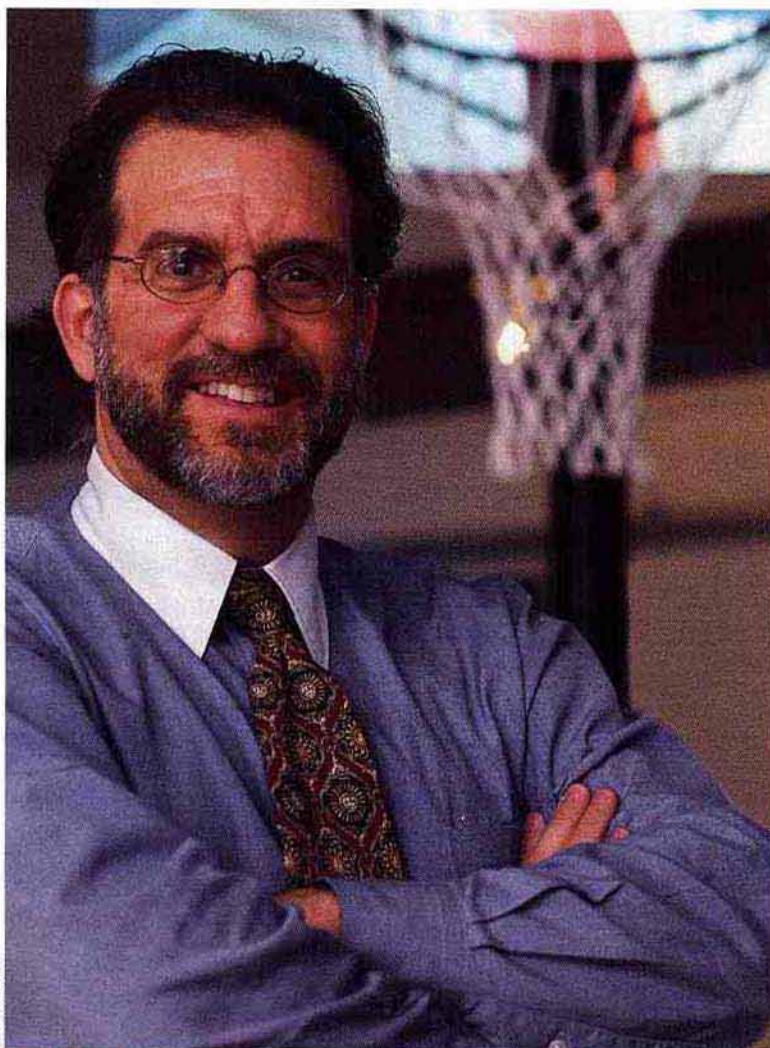
ON A RAINY DAY in December, David Polinchock was doing one of the many things that draw ooohs and aahs from the audiences of marketing and advertising executives that visit his Brand Experience Lab. He was shooting a beam of sound around the room.

By pointing a flat, circular speaker at various objects in the SoHo loft space, he made it sound as though the walls, couches or even some of the visiting staffers from Grey Advertising were producing the strains of a Sergio Mendes song. The cool technology combined with the bearded and lab-coat-wearing Mr. Polinchock's mild-mannered, professorial demeanor made the moment seem more like a field trip than work, but the practical applications for advertising professionals are also pretty clear.

#### POOLS OF SOUND

Laserbeam audio, as Mr. Polinchock calls it, allows retailers—long slaves to harsh, disruptive public-address systems—to create distinct pools of sound targeted for individual shoppers.

The device was developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for the military as a communications method and as a non-lethal way to disable enemy soldiers on the battlefield. Finds like these—which arise from relationships with institutions such as Carnegie Mellon,



CHRIS CASSIDY  
**THE PROFESSOR:** Polinchock introduces marketers and agencies to high-tech concepts in the lab.

New York University and the University of Southern California—are the selling point that Mr. Polinchock hopes will make his 2-year-old independent Brand Experience Lab a kind of playroom for marketers and agencies. The toys in the playroom are high-tech gadgets, like gesture-

recognition technology a la "Minority Report," that marketers can adapt to their needs.

"A lot of marketers wouldn't know Nicholas Negroponte if he fell over them," said Brian Collins, senior partner-executive creative di-

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## Lab

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rector at the Brand Integration Group, a unit of WPP Group's Ogilvy & Mather, referring to the futurist, MIT professor and *Wired* co-founder. "David is trying to connect technological thinking with making. He can think about these interesting new technologies that work at 30,000 feet and, with the laboratory, he shows how it works at ground level."

Mr. Polinchock, who runs the five-person firm with CEO Barry Grieff, describes the advice his firm doles out, alongside the tech know-how, as experience marketing as opposed to experiential. "One is strategic, it's at the core of who you are," he said. "The other is tactical, used to create buzz."

#### BIG GAP

Because the technologies the lab showcases are expensive and often available only as a prototype, there's often a big gap between ideas and execution. The lab sometimes requires partnerships with universities to turn prototypes into products. Although much of the work is conceptual, Brand Experience has created a synthetic interview for Glaxo-SmithKline to support its Nicorette and NicoDerm CQ brands that allows users to ask golf legend Arnold Palmer—or at least a version of him captured on videotape and posted online—questions about his success in quitting smoking. For Old Navy's leadership conference, it used gesture-recognition technology to create games that helped enhance a team-building effort.

In some ways, what never gets past the drawing board is as compelling as the executions. Brand Experience performed an audit for Nicholas Utton when he was a marketing executive at JP Morgan Chase, before its merger with Bank One. Chase, with its depersonalized, amenity-free branches, has watched smaller rivals such as Washington Mutual and Commerce Bank develop strong brands based on the idea that banking can be customer-friendly.

To help improve the Chase experience, Brand Experience proposed a host of employee- and customer-centric initiatives. The 64-page proposal covered everything from an employee break room to equipping tellers with PDAs that would allow them to attend to customers as they wait in line. It also included kiosks that would allow swipe-and-go transactions and ATMs that dispense financial advice as well as cash. The merger eventually put the kibosh on the proposal, but not before it made an impression on Mr. Utton, now chief marketing officer at E-Trade.

"It's very different, it's very targeted, it's not abrasive and there's an element of coolness," Mr. Utton said. "Is it perfect for every retailer out there looking for experiential options? No. But it certainly was something that opened our eyes."

Which is exactly what Mr. Polinchock is trying to do, as marketers are under increasing pressure to find new ways of creating meaningful interactions with customers. "As we create more and more places to send them messages, they find more and more ways to turn the messages off," he said. "They need a different set of conversations to occur." ■