

## Article Body:

Event Attendance: If you build it will they come?

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Remember the days when you would simply publish the dates of your meeting and the world would "beat a path" to your door? Remember when you could predict within a dozen or so how many delegates, exhibitors and sponsors would show?

Times have changed. According to a recent survey, attendance at meetings and events is the number one issue facing our industry today. Those of us who are struggling with challenges wrought by SARS understand how a headline can change the attendance intentions of a delegate in a heartbeat. Throw in other factors such as war and economic uncertainty and it seems like an event is becoming a crapshoot. With dues revenues accounting for up to 40% of an association's annual revenues, we understand how critical attendance at events has become.

So what forces are influencing the decision of a delegate to attend an event? They include, but are certainly not limited to:

- **Time:** There is never enough. Your delegate pays the same price you do when they are away three or four days.
- **Competition:** There are more events than ever trying to lure attendees, exhibitors and sponsors. With over 1000 new associations formed every year, the field is getting pretty thick.
- **Expectations:** Today's attendees are more experienced and are generally nearing the pinnacle of their careers. They expect to be impressed by your program. This is an increasingly challenging task

In short, your prospective attendees are looking for personal and professional return on investment by attending your event. They shop. Members still indicate that

meetings and conventions are their primary source of new knowledge. They will, however, seek out the program best suited to meet their needs, and there is a whole lot to choose from.

How do you win in this environment? Here are a few suggestions.

- **Know your audience.** Be sure that you have defined your actual and desired attendees, exhibitors and sponsors and understand their wants and expectations of your event. These change, so check often.
- **Know your competition.** Content, pricing, timing and new events all have to be regularly reviewed to ensure your offering is on target.
- **Change.** Be prepared to re-engineer your event to meet the needs of your target audience. The duration, location and format are all worth a look.
- **Build relationships.** Today, you must be closer to your members, attendees, exhibitors and sponsors in order to get them and keep them. Marketing must be a dialogue. Only by communicating regularly and effectively can you foresee and adapt to their changing demands. Give them what they want in the way that they want it and you can't lose.
- **Don't plan in the dark.** If your target audience of attendees, exhibitors and sponsors is not part of your strategic planning process, you're missing a great opportunity to learn. You also have a great opportunity to cement your institutional relationships with your most important members by reaching out to them.
- **Ask the hard questions.** I have actually had association-meeting planners tell me, "We don't want to survey for that because if it's really that bad, we don't want to know!" They always laugh of course, but you would be amazed how often I hear that. The point of course is that the problems exist whether we know of them or not. It is *always* better to know so that you can direct strategic resources to improving on the challenges.
- **Fire yourselves.** I always ask the members of my client project teams to "fire" themselves. I ask them to imagine that they no longer work for their association, but for a newly formed competitor. The goal of this new association is to put the other out of business in three years. I point out that they were "hired" by the new association because they know the strengths and weaknesses of the other and are best suited to beat the tar out of them. How do we win over the other's members, exhibitors and sponsors and how do we cut them off from the new members they seek? How can we do better what they do best? What are they lousy at that we can shame them by being really good at? In this mindset, project teams can be their own "best enemies."
- **Talk to those who don't come.** Why limit your research to those who already attend and participate in your association's events? Those who *do not* attend have just as much to teach us about what we need to do in order for our events to thrive. Reach out and talk to them.

- **Spy.** I encourage my clients to join their largest competitor's associations and participate as an average member. Average, because we want to know the "real-world" experience afforded members of the competition. Only then are we well positioned to act tactically in order to win.
- **Reach out.** Remember that a competitor can be a collaborator. They are likely facing the same challenges as you are. Look at your universe and decide who you can team up with to achieve mutual success within the next three years. Cross marketing can be a very effective way of ensuring that attendance for both organizations grows.
- **Market to the whole person.** Remember that the individuals in your "target audience" are human beings. Some associations tend to be so institutional in their marketing that they speak only to a narrow part of their audience's personality. The more you can link your institutional messaging to basic human needs and wants, the more people will respond to it.
- **Brand.** Think about how much information you receive in a day. Today, a four-year-old has been exposed to more information than one experienced in a lifetime only three generations ago. In all of that, your messaging is seeking its audience. At the very least, everything you send should have a consistent look. Your brand is *very* important. It is your business card to the world. As you seek new members, attendees, exhibitors and sponsors, be sure that your brand is a door and not a wall. It is a good idea to take time to reflect on your brand and how it presents you to the world. Is this what you want to be today?
- **Buckle up.** Today you may well feel that the speed in which forces can impact attendance at your events is unbelievable. It is. Yet, only 30% of associations have a contingency plan in case of war. Today we lament that between the economy, political uncertainties, war, air travel costs, terrorism, SARS, the internet and so on, it is almost impossible to know if our events will be well attended. True. Yet, if we think back even ten years, there were similar challenges to overcome – there's always something.

Think about the impact of the maturing of our Canadian population and retirements and you start to see the wave of change coming. Associations will see large blocks of their membership retiring at the same time in the not-too-distant future. Clearly, their future success and vitality depends on the actions they take now to ensure they are attracting new members.

Your events are a barometer of your association's health. If they are consistently growing and turning over their base of attendees, members and sponsors at healthy rate, you are in good shape. If not, consider it a signal that reflection and changes may be useful if not warranted. Your events are great advertising – they are the best showcases in which to attract new members to your association.

In summary, in order to attract attendees to your events today, the following must be a part of your strategic DNA:

- Know your audiences, speak to them and LISTEN to them.

- Be sensitive to the time pressures and the real world that they live in. Plan your events accordingly and market to them in the manner they most appreciate.
- Know your friends and your foes. Be hungry to collaborate and learn from others.
- Fire yourselves and work for your competition.
- Be flexible. The new normal is that little is. Use this climate to your advantage by refining your marketing accordingly.

If associations want to welcome attendees, exhibitors and sponsors to their events who they have never seen before, it's clear that they will have to behave and market as they never have.