

How to increase the value of events for attendees

The squeeze is on! Events across sectors are experiencing contraction, whether on the attendee and buyer side. Event organizers are being pushed to prove their ROI and further invest in their offerings in order to keep further attrition from happening. I was delighted to discuss this with one of the leading lights of the exposition business, Doug Ducate, who I met at this year's SISO CEO Summit. Doug is President and CEO of the Center for Exhibition Industry Research(CEIR). He joined CEIR in April 1998 after serving for three years as President of PGI Exhibitions and Senior Vice President of PGI, a global business communications, meetings and exhibitions, and multimedia production company headquartered in Arlington, Virginia.

I asked Doug what he recommended for event organizers experiencing the bite of the economy. He gave me four ideas:

1) Increase the value of being at the event

As we all know, traveling is a hassle, and many executives are facing increased pressure to stay in the office and handle their core business as the economy contracts. How do you keep buyers and sellers coming to your events? Increase the value of your event to the customer/prospect by taking onboard the following philosophies:

- How are you the event organizer best helping the customer use his time and money?
If you have selected the best content that fits the customer needs, brought the right products and peers together to a venue that is convenient, without having the customer breaking the bank to get and stay there, he might come. If coming will save him months and weeks of time by attending, the main obstacle the customer will have will be his schedule, so let him know well in advance so he can plan to be there.
- Make sure that if you have the right 'stuff' that you market it to the customer at the right time in the right way
Do you know whether the person prefers direct mail or email? Will the customer be delighted or annoyed with a telephone call? When do customers make the decision to attend an event and what can you do to influence that?
- "Make me feel important that I came"
We've all been to events where you're just one of many. It seems as if no-one knows or cares that you are there-or that's how you feel. Is your welcome to each person customized? Are you pro-active in your welcome? Do you have social events in which everyone can participate?
- "Take charge of your attendees the moment they hit town"
Do people know about your event when they come to the airport or the hotel or at least the event facility? Do you help them get to/from the airport and/or the hotel? Do you have an ala carte list of activities that they can participate in from the time they arrive to the moment they leave?
- Presume the selectivity of sponsors and attendees

Most people who come to events want to know that they will be with their own kind. CEO's don't usually go to events to mingle with directors, for instance.

Sellers want to see decision makers not tire kickers. What are you doing with your positioning and marketing to attract the “right” people to your event? It is it some way exclusive?

2) Increase promotional budget

A couple of articles ago, Jim Bracken of Nielsen had said that although counter-intuitive, resist the urge to cut your promotional spending, as given the economy it will be harder to get the attendance than before, all things being equal. Balance what you do by making smarter choices in your spend, using social networking and community building ideas throughout the year, not just centered around the event. Getting attendance in tough times is harder to do, make sure that you balance with adding more resources, either money or technology which allows you to be more efficient in your attendance acquisition plans.

3) Increase time savings

This is important enough for me to mention it again, make sure that you have an event which really can help your target audience save time(and money) by attending- by meeting colleagues, getting education which helps make the attendees jobs more efficient and effective. Given that anyone’s time is at a premium, make sure that your event uses the little time an attendee has efficiently and with value in mind.

4) Look at total event costs

This column wouldn’t be complete without some comment on cost cutting. Much of this repeats what Jim Bracken had mentioned, it’ll be inevitable that you’ll have to cut something. If you have to cut something, then make sure it’s something that no-one will see or experience, rather than things that will look like your brand’s image is declining.

Make sure that you do everything to maintain your image and keep the event current and experiential.

The good news is that face to face events are here to stay, in spite of virtual events, travel cutbacks and the decline of the economy. Now is the time to sharpen your pencils and make sure you give full value to each and every one of your participants and brave the storm for when times are better.

You have a lot of friends at SISO and CEIR to help, to make sure you ask for help if you need it!

Warwick Davies is the Principal of The Event Mechanic! a consulting company which helps event organizers realize greater revenues and profits by fixing ‘broken’ events and launch new ones both in United States and internationally . His clients include event organizers in the information technology, healthcare, biotechnology, construction and design engineering and executive event markets. Previously, Warwick was responsible for internationally recognizable event brands such as Macworld Conference and Expo, LinuxWorld Conference and Expo, and the Customer Relationship Management Conference and Exposition worldwide. For more information on The Event Mechanic! and past SISO The Event Doctor! columns please visit <http://www.theeventmechanic.com/resources.html> He can be reached at Warwick@theeventmechanic.com or at 781 354 0119.