

How to ride out the storm of a tough economy

As I am out in the world of events, a common topic of discussion is how the bad economy is affecting the events business and what organizations can do about it. I have the fortune recently of being able to have spoken with some event heavyweights recently, and I had the chance to speak with Tony Calanca, a Senior Vice President at Advanstar Communications. Tony joined Advanstar in 2006 and is responsible for the continued growth and direction of the company's exhibitions. Tony has over 25 years of experience with large-scale domestic and international trade and consumer exhibitions and conferences.

We were speaking about what makes the difference between perishing and thriving in the events business over the long term and he made it simple for me by giving six steps for success:

1) Build the relationship

Hopefully you already have deep and strong relationships with your stakeholders, whether they be sponsors, attendees, speakers, chairmen and so-on. You have these deep relationships because you care about their business, and because your event reflects the needs of the market, the event is successful with a strong attendee and exhibitor base.

If you don't enjoy the scenario described above, pick up the phone(or meet face to face) your stakeholders and find out the things that drive their businesses and how your event can offer value in satisfying those goals.

2) Understand what buyers want

Continuing down the line of thinking from the first point, you need understand the goals of your audience as it relates to your brand and your event. With buyers it is harder to track down all their opinions and aggregate them, but start with qualitative and quantitative market research. If done properly you could help you ascertain the state of the market which you serve and how your event is stacking up, and get valuable feedback in determining how to craft the event in the future.

Don't let this replace picking up the phone and calling attendees for their feedback.

3) Understand what exhibitors want

You are more likely to have a connection to sponsors and exhibitors since there is a direct connection them being happy with your event and their continued supply of dollars to sponsor/exhibit at your event. Do you really understand their business? Have you ever spoken to their customers to see what the sponsor needs to supply them? Successful organizers conduct visits and calls to exhibitors without any sales goal in mind with a view to understanding them and furthering the relationship.

4) Be a good consultant

This one might be controversial. Tony advises you to turn away business from your event if it's not the right fit for the customer for the sake of your long term relationship. Some exhibitors won't be right for the show, let them know, don't sell them the extra banner if it's not in their interest to do so.

When your relationship is at a deep trust level, some customers may approach you at the consultant level, and feel that you really do have their interests in mind and may seek your advice. If they follow your advice, this is a real responsibility for you, so treat it like gold!

5) Offer cost-effective alternatives

There may be circumstances where you can save your sponsors time and money that you must look at if your event will survive tough times. One idea is to change the format of your exhibit hall to be one where everyone gets a turn-key booth which is the same size to stop the 'promo' wars which sometimes occur at shows. Tony says "Put the value in exhibiting on the convening not the construction". Other examples might be to put the 'squeeze' on your suppliers to offer cheaper drayage rates, offer joint shipment offers, etc. Sharpen your pencil to see how you can pass on other cost and time savings. Your sponsors will thank you for it, and will remember you when you ask for the order!

6) Maintain relationships

Building a relationship is relatively easy. Maintaining quality relationships with key stakeholders over the long term is hard. For MAGIC – Advanstar's Men's, Women's and Kid's Apparel Expo, Tony's team has 23 people responsible in nurturing buyer relationships. You may not have the staff to do this, but Tony is really showing these buyers how he value's their interest and commitment to the event. His staff also makes 5000 retail store visits a year. Are you as serious in maintaining the relationships you have?

Much of the above requires a long term commitment, and to able to maintain relationships, you need to have them in the first place. Get started now, and although you'll need to embark on these things in the long haul, having good solid relationships with your key market drivers will help you survive this and future downturns. Invest in these relationships and you won't be sorry.

Happy New Year and may your road in 2009 be as easy as possible!

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