

How to extend the 'yardstick' of "wow" at your event!

I am always interested in how event organizers find the magic formula of transforming their events into an experience (see past columns). In my quest to continue to educate myself in these matters I attended The SISO Executive Conference in August which gave me a chance to both hear some of the newest ideas and meet some old and new people that are continuing to drive such marketing successes. I had a chance to make the acquaintance of Charles Allen Chairman of the CW Allen Group after the event, and had a VERY interesting conversation relative to the role of the modern event organizer in creating an experiential event. Here's an excerpt of our conversation:

The Event Doctor: Obviously, our industry is changing at 'break neck' speed especially in marketing and what people experience at events... What *real* macro trends do you see occurring and which ones will be lasting ones versus some of the temporary aberrations?

Charles Allen: For starters, event organizers have experienced a profound 'paradigm shift' throughout the last decade. And, that has to do with the '*real* business' that they are in to begin with. The paradigm of selling (leasing concrete) real estate is dead. The days of "It's my job to get the attendees to the venue... and 100% my exhibitors' job to get them to their booths" is a bygone as well. The real business of event organizers is that of selling marketing opportunities (pre, at and post event.. and now with the 'on line' marriage of 'marketing' and 'marketplace', 365 days per year... 24 hours per day) to a highly qualified target audience. We'll continue to see so much more 'thinking outside of the booth'... and a far less rigid and strict grid of aisles and rows at event venues.. as these marketing opportunities take on many different manifestations, from amphitheatres, to special (many non-endemic sponsored) 'attractions' and highly creative 'value added' services, etc.. Whatever the form of exhibitor / sponsor participation... what they are really buying is '*access to a highly qualified and targeted audience*'.

ED: Has the role of the event organizer changed then? How?

CA: The entire role of show organizers has evolved away from the old 'transaction broker' one. I'm referring to the "I'll sell this many registrations... and that many exhibitors.... and put them together once a year in a large room" (and hope that they'll come back next time). The evolution of our industry has produced the new role of 'conductor' for the show organizer, as the organizer *connects* his or her 'community' into commerce and higher learning 365 days per year... 24 hours per day, *all* under the veil of his or her 'event brand'. The event brand becomes the total resource of its respective industry (community) to help accelerate organizational sales cycles... (employing all on-line, off line 'marketing' and ultimate 'marketplace' elements) to help maximize the ROI on every

marketing dollar spent in so doing. In this regard, the organizer who keeps his or her event fresh, valuable and highly relevant has been significantly empowered to govern this vital function.

ED: One of the themes of the SISO Executive Conference was about capturing the attention of your audience to experience your event in unique ways, what do you think?

CA: Well, the industry has finally awoken to the fact that we're living amidst the most time-impooverished and attention span-battered business culture in the history of mankind. For this reason, events are increasingly embracing the number one rule of show business... 'Always keep the audience wanting more'. Increasingly, the secret to accomplishing this is to make them part of the show. People are motivated to the exact degree they feel involved (i.e. low involvement = low energy, low enthusiasm, low buzz). For the aforementioned reasons, we're seeing the advent of the new supremacy of 'experiential marketing'. The 'yard stick' of "wow"... must continue to extend. This is precisely why static sponsorships at event are quickly losing ground to the kinetic (in motion), and the kinetic sponsorships are conceding to the 'interactive' ones. This evolution has forced a newfound 'focus' on *quality* of impressions versus simply the *quantity* of them. Customized events will continue to make popularity gains, as it is one of the consummate ways to make the audience part of the show. Since adults learn faster... and are more likely to conduct commerce "while having an entertaining and meaningful experience"... it really is about the '*experience*'. No one has to go to an event to attain information anymore.

ED: How can I not agree? Thanks Charles. Given the above, here's what we prescribe for you to 'extend the 'yardstick' of "wow" at your event:

Provide opportunities for the people at your event to get to know each other.

It's all about the networking! The 'secret sauce' and value of attending an event can be the interaction that you don't control, as mentioned by Charles this fits into your role as 'conductor' of the event.

Take advantage of the location to make the event an experience

If you are in San Diego, San Antonio or New York, make sure you take advantage of the activities that the city(or location) has to offer! Even if you don't host the 'off-hours' activities, make sure you list the 'things to do' in your attendee materials.

Encourage the other stakeholders to make their presence at the event an experience

If you have a theme to the event, see if you can get the speakers and sponsors to mirror the theme so it seems like their participation helps extend the theme, or allow (ie charge them for the privilege) them to sponsor dinners, breaks or after hours activities to increase their interaction with the attendees of the event.

Have your onsite staff participate in the event, so there is no 'us vs. them'

Does your staff hide in the management office during lunches, networking and other activities? Your staff, where possible, should make the attempt to mingle with exhibitors, speakers and attendees to make you seem more of a part of the community which your event serves rather than a supplier to it.

The bottom line is to understand that the bar has been raised and a failure to understand your prospective attendee desires for value driven information is an opportunity or problem, depending on how you grasp the situation. Carpe diem!

Warwick Davies is the Principal of The Event Doctor!, a consulting company which helps event organizers turn unprofitable events into profitable events. His clients include organizers in the information technology, healthcare, biotechnology and executive events 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. He can be contacted at Warwick@theeventdoctor.net