

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Even as travel budgets are slashed and show attendance slows, you know the importance of event marketing to both your company and your customers. Here are some tips to help communicate that. **By Erin Biba**

IT'S NO SECRET that the recent downturn in the American economy is affecting the events industry. Budgets are being slashed; event attendees are less willing or able to travel; and those attendees that do show up are also feeling the effects of the poor financial state of the country. As a result, exhibitors are being forced to scrutinize every detail to prove the value of their events. ¶ The upside, however, is that with good strategic planning, a little creativity and a few tweaks to traditional marketing methods already in place, b-to-b marketers will be able to continue holding successful events. Here are some strategies and trends to keep CMOs allocating dollars toward events:

PROVE ROI NOW

If you only make one change to your marketing strategies, implementing ROI tracking programs should be the change; managers and CEOs will be asking marketers to justify the expense of events.

"If you're not on the measurement train, you better get on right away," said David Rich, senior VP-strategic marketing at George P. Johnson (GPJ), an experience marketing agency. "Those who have data are going to be in a much better position to have an informed conversation around that cost-cutting conversation than those who don't."

GPJ's recent "EventView" study, in conjunction with the Event Marketing Institute and Meeting Professionals International, found marketers that measure ROI are 2½ times more likely to receive increases in their marketing budgets than those that don't.

"We can surmise the reality underneath all of this is that it's not just about increasing budgets, it's about maintaining campaigns, programs and staff posi-

tions as well," Rich said.

The study was conducted from last December through this February. More than 1,000 individuals in marketing management positions in Asia/Pacific, Europe and North America were interviewed via telephone with the goal of clarifying the value of and role that events play in the marketing mix. The results of the 2009 survey have a margin of error of 3%.

In order to institute metrics quickly, most marketers advise hiring a company familiar with how it is done. Some methods include polling attendees before and after a show via e-mail or surveying attendees during a show. Marketers that would rather take on the task themselves can use Exhibit Survey's free ROI toolkit, available at <http://roitoolkit.exhibitsurveys.net/>.

BOOST PRE-EVENT MARKETING

When convincing attendees of an event's worth, marketers should also be providing potential attendees with the tools to enable them to persuade them on that score.

"The quandary that marketers are in right now is that companies are being asked to reduce costs. It's very important to continue to show the value in getting people together," said Alison Jenks, VP-marketing at event marketing agency TBA Global.

"Showing the long-term, intangible benefits of an event is very important. Most likely attendees will need to make an argument about attending. Helping them talk about it with the people who approve their attendance and making that individual very aware of what the benefits will be is a good idea," she said.

One method is to have the thought leaders and speakers who will be giving presentations at the event help spread the word in advance. Have them connect to attendees through social networking or via the Web to give a preview of the types of useful information they will be providing those who attend.

Perks are also good: Cisco Systems recently introduced its NetVet program, which gives special VIP privileges to attendees who have been to three Cisco events in a row. In addition, many companies have been offering discounts for early registration.

GO DIGITAL OR GO HOME

Aside from the fact that digital events provide a significantly greater opportunity for measurement and attendee tracking, they also tackle the travel problem, since Web-based events make it easier for attendees to choose your event over other, non-Web-

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Hybrid event brings groups together live and on Web

BY ERIN BIBA

Lightolier, a 150-year-old lighting manufacturer, wanted to introduce a new product on the East and West coasts simultaneously. The event would bring together more than 1,000 customers and business partners, along with 500 members of the company's national sales force. But bringing all 1,500 targeted attendees together at one event would have come at a great expense.

So instead, the company enlisted digital marketing agency Cramer, Norwood, Mass., to help it build a national "hybrid" event. Customers last November were hosted by members of the Lightolier sales team in nine cities around the U.S. From Lightolier headquarters in Fall River, Mass., the company delivered its live product announcement to each local event center via the Web.

The company's president announced the debut of EXCEED, its recessed lighting design that maximizes environmentally friendly compact fluorescent light bulbs, and later the company's product manager moderated an interactive online Q&A. Throughout the live webcast, attendees could ask questions and participate in real-time polls, which allowed the company to engage the audience as well as collect metrics about what people were and weren't interested in.

"The main advantage to us was to be able to reach out to that number of people without having to travel out of state," said Kevin Brewster, manager of media services at Lightolier. "The product that we were releasing was an environmentally friendly product, and it seemed out of character to fly 500 sales reps [across the country]."

Additionally, Brewster said, the financial benefits to spreading a single event out to several states were extremely high. "The flight arrangements, the catering, the hotel accommodations, plus the cost of a large event ... the cost savings were astronomical," Brewster said. "It was sort of a no-brainer to do the event this way. In the long run, we ended up reaching a lot more people than we would have, and we saved a ton of money."

Once the Web-based event concluded, members of the local sales force—who were prepped about the product in advance of the event—could demo the new product in person for customers and business partners. "Within minutes of releasing the product to our

sales force, they were closing deals—major deals," Brewster said. "We still had the face-to-face opportunity. The sales team had their own minievents with the distributors. They all watched the Web release together, then the sales reps were there with the product in hand. They didn't lose the person-to-person benefit; they just gained the benefit of having our actual designers present the product and the president of our company give the rundown. So they gained a lot."

Rob Everton, creative director at Cramer, says that the hybrid event boosted communication between attendees and the Lightolier brand. "You've

Case Study

HOW LIGHTOLIER USED A 'HYBRID' EVENT TO SUCCESSFULLY LAUNCH A NEW PRODUCT

Objective: Concurrently launch a single product in nine states while bringing the benefits of a face-to-face event to each customer and business partner attending the launch.

Strategy: Using a live-television-inspired, enhanced webcast, the company created events in each state that linked attendees to the central location. Top sales representatives at each location were present to answer questions, provide a live demo of the new product and conduct sales on-site.

Results: A successful combination of a live face-to-face event with a Web-based product launch resulted in significant money savings and immediate sale of brand new products.

now got content that's available online all the time. There are a lot of reasons to look at alternatives [to a single large event]. The authenticity of actually seeing the people present opposite you is critical," he said.

Ultimately, the company's customers and sales force were all pleased with the results of the event. "The feedback was overwhelmingly positive," Brewster said. "People really did appreciate not having to take four days out of their schedule. They commented on being able to go back and review the archived webcast at any time."

In light of the recent economic downturn, Brewster expects the cost savings and success of this event will lead the company to repeat it in the future. "I don't think that major full-scale events are going to go away, but they certainly are going to decrease. This will more than likely be the major direction we go in. This isn't just a replacement or a substitute. It's more convenient." □