How to Avoid a ‘Snoozefest’ and Instead Execute a Well-Regarded B2B Event

Remember the tale about the strait-laced conference attendees forced to suffer through line dancing and mechanical bull-riding?

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The business-to-business (B2) events industry is growing by leaps and bounds: Worldwide revenues in 2016 amounted to $30.3 billion, up from $29.3 billion a year earlier, according to Statista, to cite the latest data available. And the number of B2B events, from trade shows and conferences to sales and marketing meetings, has only increased, as have overall spend and attendance figures, American Express’s *Global Meetings and Events Forecast* reported.

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So, what strategies work to turn some of these potentially ho-hum industry snoozefests into hot tickets?

That’s a burning question for me, since I personally attend anywhere from ten to 12 events in and out of my industry every year. I’m also running my organization’s symposium, Affordable Housing Investment: Impactful Returns Realized, in Washington, D.C., in October — an event whose attendance has grown each of its three years. That’s why I’ve been taking careful notes on what works and what doesn’t at these B2B events.

Here’s some of what I’ve learned as a veteran event-goer, and someone who regularly gathers advice from the experts.

Begin by researching your audience and knowing what they like/dislike.

Here, I’d recommend a poll or survey pre-event, with subsequent follow-up. I’d also mention a story from an associate who once attended an event in Texas that included a visit to a typical country western bar complete with line dancing and bull riding. This was not the right crowd to bring to that venue, however, and the event planner could have avoided the stony glances she received had she presented attendees with a survey ahead of time.

Having planned numerous events and attended what she calls way too many conferences, PR practitioner Barbara Marks recommends sending surveys ahead of time, since “People’s tastes change like the seasons and you have to stay on top of what will make your event memorable and well attended.”

Leverage all your contacts to lock in some big names.

I know from my own experience working to draw big name politicians and business leaders to our events that you have to milk every contact you have to gain access. Toward this end, it helps to have a good “elevator speech” to sell people on the merits of the event. *Pro tip:* honor your a-list names. *Pro tip:* No matter how far someone’s come in his or her career, everyone still appreciates an award.

Make your event easy to attend.

You’ve heard the old saw: location, location, location. Add to this: time, time, time. Pick places that are fun but not so

much fun that you'll lose attendees to the pool every day. ULI (Urban Land Institute), a trade organization that is the oldest and largest network of cross-disciplinary real estate and land use experts in the world, does this well. I attended its event this year in Nashville which combined its serious subject matter at hand with a visit to a "Songwriters in the Round."

This was an "insider" Nashville tradition not on every tourist's agenda; and that made it fun. As Ari Jones, owner of Washington, D.C.-based event planning firm ARJ Productions, told us, "Choosing a venue that has options for your guests to congregate prior to or after your event is key. Offer a post-party at a nearby location for the networking to continue after your event concludes." *Pro tip:* It's frequently said that the real business of any meeting takes place before and after the serious stuff, and I believe it.

Lose your clipboard!

There are some brilliant tech tools out there, soup to nuts, that you can acquire to make your own event planning and execution much easier. Having an app for the event itself, for instance, is essential. Encourage your guests to use it. Gather information about what they're saying. And recognize that connectivity during the event itself is critical. *Pro tip:* Make sure that event wi-fi passwords, the Twitter tag and charging stations are easily available. Then watch what people are posting and live-tweeting throughout the event.

Inject a lot of personal touches.

Is this the secret sauce? Maybe! As Jones, the event planner, said, "Personalize your event with custom touches that attendees haven't experienced at other events. *Pro tip:* Keep it current and unique, in this age when guests are saturated by the same types of events. Think outside the box and put

your own spin on event details.”

Most importantly, remember: #No boring events

Keep things lively with different mini events within the overall event, and make each one shorter than attendees expect it to be. Nancy Shenkar, a marketing consultant, writer and professional speaker, as well as former CMO of Reed Exhibitions (one of the world’s largest event organizers) told us: “We’re living in the Instagram era and attention spans are incredibly short. Although you need to offer substance to guests, you also want to keep sessions energetic and brief.”

Her pro tip: “Pick your speakers and activities wisely and give them unique and memorable learning and entertainment experiences.”

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Shenkar added that the trend at innovation events like Collision has been toward 20-minute sessions.” Added Jones:, “Create experiences for your guests where they can actively engage during the event, whether it’s at a VIP meet-and-greet or an interactive food and drink station.” Jones continued: “Think through the flow of your event from a perspective of having guests up and out of their seats at certain times throughout the event, to pique interest.”

Not only will you capture guests’ interest; you’ll avoid having hosted one of those dreaded snoozefests.

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