

## white space

In the White Space, lofty ideas create innovative actions that lead to distinct success. It is where the science of marketing and visual communication translates into membership growth, improved retention and increased member participation. The best and latest tips and resources related to retaining, communicating with and growing your organization's membership are all right here.

### Make your conference a positive BRAND experience

**LAST YEAR, ASSOCIATIONS SAW A 25-50% TO DROP IN CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE.**

Surveys show the outlook for this year isn't much better. Yet we're seeing associations use the same approach to marketing their conference year after year. **That's like writing your own one-way ticket to failure!**

If you're reusing the same tired strategies and hoping that people will attend, then we have news for you: **Hope alone doesn't sell seats at a conference.** People who have attended in the past and see the same marketing approach will assume that you're spitting out the same info as the year before. And for those who haven't attended, well, if your marketing pieces didn't win them over last year, then why would this year be any different?

Here's another dose of tough love: associations like yours are feeling the pinch both from the economy and from social media, which is breaking down geographic barriers and allowing like-minded people to connect without shelling out for a conference.

**Don't believe us?** Just look at SuperComm, which was one of the biggest technology trade shows in the early 2000s with over 50,000 attendees in 2001. Attendance dropped to 6,400 last year and the two associations that sponsor the trade show decided to cancel the 2010 event altogether. When members don't attend your conference, it reflects poorly on your association's brand, which can translate to poor member retention.

The fact is that associations planning conferences need to do more with fewer resources and fewer staff people in order to survive in this dog-eat-dog climate. And the secret to getting more bang for that hard-earned buck can be summed up in two simple words: **BRAND EXPERIENCE.**

#### SO, WHAT IS THIS ELUSIVE BRAND EXPERIENCE?

A positive brand experience reinforces your association's reputation and strengthens relationships with your members. When they log onto the conference website or get a postcard and see something memorable that conveys passion for your organization, that's a positive brand experience. It's a gut feeling, like love at first sight. (**OK, let's not get too carried away.**)

The experience reignites members' interest and inspires them to attend the conference. It might also inspire them to become your brand ambassador and share the info with an unaware colleague. Score!



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### OK, SMART GUYS. SO, HOW CAN WE CREATE A GOOD BRAND EXPERIENCE?

First, don't think about how that postcard or website or banner should look. Think about the feelings it should create and the actions it should motivate. Do you want members to think, "wow, this is exactly what I need to take our fundraising to the next level! I'm going to register right now!?" Or maybe, "this medical conference could connect me with important researchers - why haven't I gone before?"

Notice that in both of these instances the branding experience is effective, because it speaks to the members' needs and plays up the value of attendance. Being different is all well and good, but it's more important to be relevant to members.

In the first case, our friendly fundraising professional needs to learn some new strategies. He gets a postcard in the mail, checks out the website, and **\*BAM\*** he's sold! It helps with a need for him, because the association understands its members and created an easy-to-navigate site that content that's useful to them. The other hypothetical attendee gets her needs met, because the association emphasizes the connections that members can make to boost their research. They chose a story that resonates with her, and it worked!

### WAIT! HOW DO WE FIGURE OUT WHAT OUR MEMBERS REALLY WANT?

If only it were as easy as Mel Gibson made it look in *What Women Want*. It takes some time to get inside your members' heads, but that time is an investment that will pay off down the road. Remember, building a successful and sustainable brand isn't a sprint to the finish line. It's a marathon that never quite ends, because your brand needs to evolve over time as needs change and the marketplace changes.

#### HERE'S HOW TO EXAMINE YOUR MEMBERS' NEEDS:

1. Look at your current members - Why did they join? What do they get out of membership? What social media platforms do they use? What will motivate them to renew?
2. Look at the kind of new members you want to reach - What keeps them from joining your association or attending your conference? What needs are not being met?
3. Look inward to your organization - Are you already doing great things that nobody knows about? That could be part of your brand's promise!
4. Look at competitors to see how they position themselves - What resonates with their members? What doesn't?

You can't possibly talk to every single member, so you'll need to extrapolate information from those you do reach. Then you can create personas that speak to their needs and help you hone in on a branding strategy.

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### **I'M PASSIONATE AND I THINK I UNDERSTAND MEMBERS' NEEDS. HOW DO I COMMUNICATE THAT?**

Hiring a skywriter to fly over a major sporting event usually does the trick for us. Just kidding! Use this checklist to ensure that your conference materials reflect the right message and fulfill the appropriate needs.

**What story are you telling?**

**What problems are you solving?**

**What needs are you meeting?**

**Are you including a clear call to action?**

**Do you encourage open communications with your members?**

**Are you promoting value over venue?**

**What unique attributes of your product or service distinguishes your conference?**

All of these areas are related, but they point back to numero uno: storytelling. Find the right story to tell and the appropriate actions, problems, and needs will become crystal clear. And if you do a really good job solving the right problem and telling the right story, then members will be so jazzed they'll tell your story, too, perhaps using tools like email, blogs, and Twitter. All the more reason for your association to embrace these tools, too.

But remember that the story should focus on the value attendees will get out of your conference, not all the cool amenities of your conference venue. Over the years, we've seen a few too many associations get caught up in promoting the venue to the exclusion of their conference, which creates brand conflict and confusion. Conference venues have their own marketing staff; it's your job to find the unique selling point of your conference and share that story.

### **BUT ISN'T GOOD BRANDING EXPENSIVE?**

Conferences and other events offer you an opportunity to engage members, reaching out to unaware prospects and strengthening the bond with existing members so they'll renew membership. In fact, a 2009 survey of senior marketing and sales executives found that respondents believe event marketing is the channel that provides the greatest return on investment. Of course, that's assuming that you create a strong, memorable brand for the event.

But you don't need fireworks or skywriting to lure attendees. Focus your conference design and marketing on the purpose of the event and the brand experience you want to convey. When marketing choices are strategic, everything supports the brand, ensuring that nothing is wasted. It also gives your association the best return on investment possible.

Besides, the alternative (laziness or just plain bad branding) will cost your association even more. Low attendance translates to lost revenue, lost members, and, in some cases, lost jobs.

