

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.

Positioning Your Annual Conference for Greater Attendance

What exactly are you promoting?

Let's pretend that you are promoting a conference in Washington DC for middle-school teachers about using online curriculum. After going through your typical strategy and marketing plans, you end up with some great collateral pieces. The campaign begins and your first direct mail piece lands in the hands of a busy, first-year, middle-school science teacher. She glances at your shiny postcard for only a few seconds before going back to class. What will she walk away thinking about your event?

- A) This is a conference for teachers.
- B) This is a conference in DC.
- C) This is a conference about teaching using technology.

The answer to that question is key. Even if the economy was great. Even if all school teachers received a raise this year, and airfare was the lowest it's been in years, and your conference was in the perfect location. The answer to that question will determine your conference's attendance.

The answer you want in our little scenario is C, and the way you get it is by positioning your conference as a unique offering. If you fail to do so, then you are simply selling **a conference**. The young teacher in our example receives direct mail, emails and invitations from other professional organizations each week. You have joined the rest of them in reinforcing her thoughts of joining a professional group, or maybe attending **a conference** some day. But, without correct positioning you failed to tell her about **your conference**. Without correct positioning you are wasting a lot of time and money on marketing.

Beating out the competition.

You are correct in saying that the recession has affected your conference attendance numbers, but solely chalking it up to small budgets is a shortsighted conclusion. Other factors have created a tougher, more competitive environment. Consolidation has happened in many industries, plus other organizations and for-profit shows are looking to survive by expanding their audiences to include your niche markets. A lack of positioning, will result in a continued drop in attendance. And as your share of the market slips away it will be your fault, not the economy's.



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We're changing the way organizations market their conference - one conference at a time.

We perceive that conference marketing is one arm of an organization's holistic messaging for fulfilling their mission. We embrace conference marketing efforts that will enhance an organization's strategic messaging and fit within the organization's overall goals.

Let's step away from the marketing talk, speak human, and get down to do some practical tips.

Tips on successfully positioning a conference.

Be unique.

You must differentiate or take the chance of becoming irrelevant. An effective brand has separated itself from its competitors by finding a unique selling position in the marketplace. If you position yourself without differentiation, you're selling a category; you are simply selling another conference, and you will not be remembered or recognized. One of the biggest mistakes we see associations make is promoting their conference based on the venue location, which says nothing unique about the organization or the conference.

Questions to ask:

1. Who are your competitors?
2. What unique attributes of your products or services distinguish your conference from those of your competitors?
3. How do you view your association—If your conference was a car brand what would it be? Why?

Stay focused on the association's brand strategy.

Before you tell the world about your brand, you should have buy-in within your organization. You should have champions of the brand in your organization. (If you don't, well... Go directly to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. And, use your one phone call to call us.)

Questions to ask:

1. How do you see your brand (conference) in 5 years?
2. How does your conference fit into the over all brand strategy of the association?
3. How do you want your members to feel, think and act?

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Talk about the benefits.

In our niche-oriented society, brands are successful when they are created for the consumer. Identify what your niche market desires and show them how your conference meets their needs. *(Check out our blog for a list of benefits that have helped other associations meet their attendance goals this year.)*

Questions to ask:

1. How does your conference solve a problem or meet a need for your target audience?
2. Why is your conference the best solution for them?

Identify the purpose of the conference.

Before any work can be done in marketing your event, you have to discover the true purpose of the conference. Think about what it brings to your attendees and to the association.

Questions to ask:

1. Is the purpose to increase attendance or revenue?
2. Is your main goal to recruit new members, new sponsors and new exhibitors?
3. Are you launching a new product?
4. Are you motivating, educating or training?

Push the right information.

Your conference's positioning will inform potential members about the most important and valuable information.

Questions to ask:

1. What is non-negotiable about your conference, and must happen at all costs?
2. If you had to change one thing from your conference what would it be?
3. If you had to trash one thing from your conference what would it be?

Think about all the sales pitches, emails, and phone calls you receive each day. Which ones stick with you? The ones that were unique and made an impression on you - whether good or bad. A lack of positioning for your conference means that for the potential attendees reviewing your postcards, brochures and websites, **your association** will not make an impression on them.

This is not the time to practice The Three Musketeers style of conference marketing that promotes the category of professional conferences instead of **your conference**. We are not all for one, or one for all. Your association has a distinct identity. Your annual conference is a unique experience. Tell that story, instead of the story about how DC is a lovely city.

