

10 Marketing:

IN CON

“Successful Conference Marketing”



Planning and delivering a conference involves many thousands of person hours but even the most impeccably organised event can fail to achieve the anticipated numbers of fee paying delegates. Inevitably this reflects a weakness in the area of event promotion. How can this be addressed and what are the key elements in successful conference marketing? A well prepared marketing plan is fundamental and it should consider the following promotional elements;

Market analysis

To reach your target audience it is vital to firstly identify it. If you don't have this information, capture it by sending out a free email survey.

Brainstorm

Avoid the "inside looking out syndrome" and capture valuable data by brainstorming with past and potential attendees to develop the value proposition of the conference.

Event branding

Promote the conference as a 'must attend' event by identifying a catchy theme or positioning statement for it e.g. "All the latest advances in XYZ under the one roof".

Conference logo/livery

Engage a competent designer to create a conference style sheet. Don't rely on the association's logo, customise a conference identity. Avoid non-standard fonts and colours - they will be lost in most web browsers.

Promotional items

Merchandise is back en vogue as a creative way of promoting a conference. Delegates attending this year's Site International Conference in Las Vegas received redeemable gambling chips. A promotional DVD can be inexpensively created by "topping and tailing" local convention bureau footage with a welcome message from the conference chairperson. Footage from a previous event is even more effective.

Website

A low cost web presence, preferably one with an easily updateable Content Management System (CMS) is necessary. Spend funds on marketing the site rather than flash animation and gimmicky count down timers. Enable Analytics to gauge where delegates are coming from and use this data to help target relevant markets. Use tools such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Adwords to improve the site rankings.

Print collateral

Print is not dead but it is more costly than PDF so use it more sparingly.

Email promotion

Email communication is cheap but it is also the least effective promotional method. 95% of all email is spam and filters are increasingly aggressive. Always use the same email address to send conference related email; ideally from the conference's own domain and never use an obscure Gmail or Hotmail address.

Promotion at other events

Engage with delegates by setting up a display booth at a kindred association conference.

Social media

In its simplest form Social Media is about using Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to blog, clog and flog people, ideas and products. Gen Y and Z may use it, but it is not widely used by mainstream Gen X or Baby Boomers, often the real source of delegate revenue. Reflect on your target audience before investing time and funds in social media tactics.

Advertising

Place low costs advertisements and diary dates in relevant journals and publications.

Direct Mail

Secure less than 20% new delegates at your event and you are regressing. Consider buying mail/email lists and designing a special campaign to generate interest.

Telemarketing

Its effective but it can be costly and the process in building and cleaning appropriate lists can be time consuming. Ask the volunteer committee to contact 10 - 20 associates and ask them in turn to contact another 10 -20; inverted pyramid style. A message coming from a trusted referrer is highly effective.

Media Relations

If budget allows profile high profile speakers to the media during the conference and leverage any press coverage after the conference

Sponsors and trade partners

Leverage sponsors and partners by encouraging them to contact their clients but do not depend too much on them.

Timepath

The overall conference time path should include;

- promotional opportunities/deadlines (e.g. cross-promotion at similar conferences; through journals)
- printed material deadlines (e.g. first announcement; call for papers; registration brochure; handbook; abstracts volume)
- scientific program and speaker deadlines (e.g. dead line for abstract submission; review procedures; deadline for full papers; audiovisual requirements etc)
- registration requirements/deadlines (e.g. early bird deadline)
- sponsorship/trade deadlines (e.g. deadlines for con firming sponsors)

And finally, the old adage that you have to spend money to make money rings true. Research shows its rare for more than 2% of conference budget to be spent on marketing the event. A minimum expenditure of 5% will be more effective in attracting new and repeat delegates.

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