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Marketing Events: Three perspectives to support Strategic Event Creation

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Learning objectives

- Recognise and distinguish between the three broad perspectives that underlie event marketing thought and practice.
- Hold a broader view of the roles that event participants play in constructing their experiences and value during their interactions at events, and the implications that this holds for event marketing practice.
- Recognise how a more strategic approach could benefit event creators.

Introduction

This chapter presents three perspectives of marketing to aid Strategic Event Creation and to facilitate the shaping and co-creation of valuable and meaningful event participant experiences. Specifically we draw on a framework which suggests that successful event marketing should encompass a broad and deep understanding of three distinct yet interrelated points of view (Tressider and Hirst, 2012). In essence this framework is aligned with a consumer marketing perspective, but a range of the ideas could be applied to business to business contexts, in the sense that the underlying themes facilitate a greater understanding of how value and meanings are created and produced through the marketing and event design process.

This chapter is strategic in its focus as it takes a holistic view of marketing by exploring the overarching logic that guides its implementation and practice, rather than adopting a focus on specific tactics and marketing principles. Indeed these latter approaches can be reviewed elsewhere in a rich strand of literature that spans decades, and in view of this they do not

warrant further discussion here. Accordingly the chapter aligns well with the specific focus and rationale for the book, which is to capture the essence of events in all their forms as strategically created and facilitated projects, rather than 'bolt on' operational activities that are delivered in support of some others' goals or strategic intent. However, in light of some of the arguments presented later, this chapter should ideally alert the strategic event creator to the creative and productive roles of their attendees, and that value creation and meaning production is both a fluid process and shared activity, taking place between producers and consumers rather than an activity only carried out by event creators. In this case, these arguments, and this perspective, more generally fully relate to Crowther's assertions in Chapter 1 of this book, that 'event creators are architects of experience journeys for their attendees and facilitators of outcomes' and that practitioners should be mindful of the fact that 'the creator's role is restricted to the purposeful crafting of settings in which the groups and individuals can attain their experiences, as experience is unavoidably derived rather than delivered'.

■ The exchange perspective of events marketing

The first perspective we will cover is known as the *exchange perspective of marketing* (e.g. Bagozzi, 1975). From the point of view of the literature, this is the most common perspective and the one that most marketing frameworks and theories originate from. This is not a perspective that we are recommending the event creator to adopt, but it is useful to consider it if only to reveal its limitations. Importantly, the underlying feature of this perspective, which distinguishes it from the others, is how it conceives of the roles and differences between event marketers and their attendees. Following the broad logic of economic theory and how this presents the differences between producers and consumers, the exchange perspective holds that customers seek out and purchase events to experience the *value* that is built and stored in them, for either immediate or future consumption. Event marketers are therefore instrumental in producing, communicating and delivering the value that is perceived and ultimately consumed. The money and/or advocacy that a participant supplies in return to the company for the experience of attending an event are what complete the exchange. Broadly speaking, this view simply holds that event marketing operates at the intersection of production and consumption and serves the marketplace by mediating supply and demand.

In effect, the key issue at play here is the concept of value, broadly defined (see Holbrook, 1999 for a thorough examination), and how it is experienced. This perspective of events marketing embraces the view that marketing centres on the production and exchange of *value*, and it is the differences between who is active in its production and consumption that are central to its logic.

To summarise, in the words of Schau et al. (2009, p.30):

‘Modern marketing logic, as derived from economics, advance[s] a view of the firm and the customer as separate and discrete; the customer is exogenous to the firm and is the passive recipient of the firm’s active value creation efforts’

As such, the exchange perspective is the closest approximation to the essence of marketing as defined by both the CIM (Chartered Institute of Marketing) and AMA (American Marketing Association) and mostly underlies the definitions found in most general marketing and events text books. This perspective thus structures most thinking around the event marketing process whereby event creators are tasked with:

- 1 Identifying and segmenting their markets.
- 2 Profiling attendees based upon need states and their potential to provide reciprocal value.
- 3 Efficiently allocating marketing resources in a competitive event context to position their products and meet the identified needs of their potential attendees.
- 4 Engaging in review activity to determine the success of their efforts and activity as well as the value that they have created for both themselves and their attendees.

Accordingly, the exchange perspective places the events creator in the privileged role of value creator and experience manager. And from this point of view, we are forced to accept the notion that events should be conceived as bundles of benefits, or containers of value and experiences, that participants can access simply through attendance (Holt, 1995). This perspective also makes the large assumption that event creators are instrumental in constructing and delivering these valuable experiences to their audiences, and relatedly, that attendees are mere recipients. However, as this chapter progresses we will see that recently this perspective and its associated theory are running into trouble from both an academic and practical point of view. This is because this perspective broadly overdetermines the importance of the event creator’s role in value creation and experience design. A growing body of evidence from a number of schools of marketing thought are identifying and mapping out a different point of view (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Lusch and Vargo, 2008; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Holt, 1995), which when combined, suggest that it is the event participants who create their experiences rather than the other way around. Instead of being central to the process of value creation event creators are now placed in a lesser but no less important role as practitioners who shape the context through which valuable experiences can be created and realised. Accordingly we are simultaneously seeing the balance of power shift from

the creator to the user, but not a diminished role or set of responsibilities for the event creator themselves. In fact, in view of the new perspectives of event marketing that we are about to discuss, we are arguably witnessing the opposite; that is to say the event creators role becomes more nuanced, strategic and involving. To explore this thinking in more detail and what it means for practice we will now examine our next perspective.

Events marketing as facilitator of service and interaction

Over the last decade a new direction in marketing has arisen that challenges the underlying logic of the exchange perspective. This emerging perspective similarly holds the concept of value as central to its logic, however it is in the focus around who creates value that it fundamentally differs. Rather than holding the assumption that event creators produce, and attendees consume value, this view suggests that value creation is a shared and fluid process, and that value is dynamically produced through the activities and interactions between event marketers and their audiences.

While there is a lot of debate about the origin of this perspective (e.g. Levy, 2006), most literature cites a paper by Vargo and Lusch (2004) as a key moment in this turn in marketing thought. In fact this paper itself is called 'Evolving to a New Dominant Logic of Marketing'. While this and later papers flesh out the orientating propositions of this perspective, which number between eight and ten in total (see Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Lusch and Vargo 2008), the key concepts through which we ground our arguments are *service, interaction, consumer resources and consumption practices, and co-creation*. We will discuss each in turn, but must point out at the start that there is significant overlap and co-dependency between these concepts (also see Crowther and Donlan, 2011).

■ Service

This concept acknowledges the fact that consumers put products into service to meet their own specific goals, as evidenced by the discussion in Chapter 4 of this book about the many and varied event attendee motivations and expectations. In this respect, in acknowledgment of the fact that different consumers may pursue different goals from other consumers, or that a consumer may pursue different goals when consuming the same product on different occasions or in different contexts, it implies that the experience and outcome of consumption is relativistic (Holbrook, 1999). That is to say, the experience and outcome of consumption is relative to:

- 1 The individual or people involved in consumption