

4

The Attendee and the Audience: a strategic approach

Jonathan Moss

Learning objectives

- To gain an understanding of what the attendees hope to gain from an event.
- To demonstrate how a holistic model can be utilised to strategically facilitate attendee outcomes.
- Through case studies illustrate how this model can be adapted for different types of events.

Introduction

This chapter will present a thorough consideration of the attendee and in doing so will discuss why they come to events, what do they get out of it and most importantly, how can we, as event creators, strategically plan our events to deliver what they want?

It will also consider existing theories and research as a platform to develop a conceptual model that can be used to interpret attendee expectations. The discussion will closely link to other chapters that consider the expectations of attendees, particularly Chapter 7. Understanding attendees' expectations provides the basis for much of the discussion in Part III of this book, specifically; facilitate the attendees' experience journey, creatively design the eventscape, and manage other aspects such as marketing and also food and drink. Event design decisions in all of these areas are underpinned by a shrewd understanding of the makeup and expectations of the attendee.

As a foundation for this discussion, this chapter will discuss how events management has previously researched the attendee and what it means to consider their motivations from a strategic perspective. In doing so, the chapter will consider other closely related disciplines to discuss what theories and perspectives can be usefully applied to our field. The last section of this chapter will discuss the future of understanding attendees and how the development of a deeper and broader perspective of motivations will give event creators a more significant insight into the attendee enabling purposeful design. Through the chapter connections to the real world will be made by using two case studies. Due to the events industry being a broad area, the two case studies will be from different sectors: business events and charity events.

The attendee

Many of us have attended a broad range of events, and have enjoyed many and varied experiences. As well as this, we may have been to the same events twice, but at different times with different people and had different or sometimes similar experiences. This variety is fuelled by the fact that we all have different motivations, expectations and preconceptions. Indeed the same person has differences from day to day and event to event. Sometimes our experiences may be similar to other peoples' experiences and what's more, our experiences may be entirely because of, and sometimes entirely unconnected to, the event and even somewhere in-between. To clarify the final point, our engagement with a university open day, for example, might be determined quite heavily by our pre-conception as to whether we like the city and want to study there. A prospective student arriving in high spirits, as they already love the city, would likely consume the open day very differently to the attendee whose parents had persuaded them to come along, even though they had already, in their heart and mind, decided on the one they visited last week.

Some of the above may feel confusing, and perhaps on the face of it, contradictory. It certainly highlights how the ability to understand 'what's in it' for the attendee of events and the prospect of how to facilitate this is a notable challenge, and perhaps it may seem easier if the attendee is not actually considered at all. To make assumptions and decisions based on 'it's worked in the past, so it will work again,' is however a foolhardy and myopic approach and not consistent with the nature of Strategic Event Creation. The interpretation of your attendee and the ability to then transfer that into proficient event design decisions is a core competence of successful event creators.

Industry voice: Nick Woodward-Shaw, Director of Global Events, Forever Living Products International, Arizona, USA

I think in terms of event design and planning if it was a piece of advice I was giving, the biggest one would be know your objectives and know your audience and I think if you know those two, the planets will align.

To expand on the view of Nick Woodward-Shaw, without attendees, there are no events and as discussed in Chapter 1, as the industry grows and matures, so does the competition. The key aspect of competition in the events industry is the need to attract attendees – to attract them from other events but also competing with all other distractions. In April 2014, as reported by the BBC, a major music festival event Oxygen was cancelled because the previous year did not consider its audience when developing its music programme. Attendees criticised it, which led to them not being able to attract major artists, the potential attendees moved to other festivals and that was sufficient to ensure the event closed down (BBC, 2014). Each year thousands of events globally suffer the same demise as Oxygen. This demonstrates that the ability to interpret what the attendee wants may well be complex and multi-faceted but it is a core aspect of Strategic Event Creation and one that must be engaged with.

The main reason for this complexity, as Beard in Chapter 7 discusses, is that experience and experiences are not homogenous or static. They are, as Beard and also Schmitt (1999) recognise, ever changing and fluid, inevitably dynamic. It can be argued that experiences are a continual feedback system that instantaneously affect our motivations, expectations and even our sense of self-identity. For example, returning to a music festival for a second time is a different experience. Memories of the previous visit have formed which change and even raise our expectations and motivations. The familiarity of the site will affect how the attendee feels connected to the festival. Perhaps the attendee might feel less of a stranger and enjoy knowing the site. Conversely, they might feel that it hasn't changed and is a bit too similar or uninspiring.

This clearly demonstrates how the repetitious adoption of the same event design, whether that be for a conference, festival, or charity event, leaves events vulnerable and will soon be found to have become outdated as the motivations of the attendees change. Have we all not experienced that sense of change – when something in a market place was incredibly new and exciting and then became common place and then out-dated? The rapid emergence and equally rapid disappearance of flash mobs as a marketing tactic convincingly evidences this point. Understanding the attendee

so well that events pre-empt what they would want to be the ultimate goal. This is often expressed by the attendee when using phrases like, “I would never have thought of that but it just worked so well, so original...” or “it felt unique, I can’t believe other places haven’t done that, I’ve never seen it before but it was the best, a new high”. It is through evaluating the attendees’ experience and then continually developing and creating based on what the attendees have experienced that facilitates this pre-knowledge. Understanding the attendee is therefore the foundation upon which purposeful event creation flourishes; it is the platform for creative design which confidently and repeatedly exceeds expectations.

Industry voice: Claire Pulford, Head of Events, Breast Cancer Care, UK

I mean if you’ve been to a Breast Cancer Care event you know you’ve been to a Breast Cancer Care event because we think very carefully about the attendee’s or the participant’s experience and it’s very personal, because we as a charity and a brand are all about caring for people.

Claire’s appreciation of the attendees’ experience is based upon a strategic understanding of the attendees’ antecedents as cancer patients, survivors and the carers. The research they do around attendee motivation and event experience provides the insight that enables the charity to ably design future event experience. The discussion now shifts to consider past research and in doing so, strive to understand how the attendee experience can be purposefully designed.

Attendance motivation research

Crompton and McKay (1997) argued that understanding audience motivations was a means to enhance design development, evaluate satisfaction and develop greater insights into the processes of decision making. Since then this area of research has gained considerable attention. This is illustrated clearly by Li and Petrick (2006) who reviewed much of the relevant research and identified all of the motivational factors from across 13 studies. Indeed, their table provides a clear overview of motivation type with many similarities of motivation through each piece of research. Distilling these commonalities down further provides us with clear typology of motivation:

- Stimulus seeking/excitement/escape
- Social contact/meeting new people/socializing
- Family togetherness