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Don't Believe the Hype?

Concepts, causes, and effects of event mis-marketing

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Overview

The ubiquitous availability and use of digital and social media combined with the transitory nature of live events offers fertile ground for event mis-marketing. When event marketing efforts fail through over-promising but under-delivering, the negative impact potentially affects not only the event's own brand, but also that of the venue, the event sub-sector, and the events industry more widely.

Live events are classic *service goods* (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Brassington & Pettitt, 2006) that are intangible, inseparable, heterogeneous, perishable, and lack ownership. As service goods, live events are particularly vulnerable to gaps between user perceptions and perceived experiences (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2013). As symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 1985) live events play a significant role in post-industrial production and consumption.

In this chapter we propose that the ephemeral and often speculative nature of live events combined with the ubiquitous availability of digital marketing tools together provide fertile ground for events marketing mismanagement, as illustrated by failed events such as the Fyre Festival (Burrough, 2017). Typical event marketing errors include dissonance in attendee expected and perceived quality, miscalculation of demand (volume and flow), dilution of original event objectives, and poor complaint handling.

The chapter aims to achieve three objectives:

- To articulate and assess critically the concepts of marketing, 'hype', and 'buzz' as applied to live events,
- To explain how the phenomenon of 'marketing hype' relates and applies to the live events industry, and
- To analyse examples of causality and impact of hype and marketing mismanagement in live events.

Illustrative cases are drawn from several sub-sectors of the live events industry, including family events (Powell, 2018; Gill, 2019), food and drink festivals (Powell, 2016; Doyle Higgins, 2018), and music events and festivals (Oppenheim, 2016; Loughrey, 2019).

A model of event mismarketing is proposed. The chapter concludes with a summary of lessons drawn and recommendations on how event managers, event producers, and event marketers can avoid similar errors in the future.

Introduction

In the late summer of 1984, the popular American singer Frank Sinatra was scheduled to perform at the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) stadium, in Toronto. The CNE had been established in 1879, initially as an agricultural fair and later incorporating industrial products as well, following in the footsteps of London's Great Exhibition of 1851 and predating the Chicago World Fair of 1893. By the 1930s the CNE had incorporated an amusement park component. An outdoor music venue, the Bandshell, was added in 1936. As the name implies, the Bandshell was purpose-built for musical performances, and designed in the style of the Hollywood Bowl.

Sinatra, however, as a leading performer of worldwide acclaim, could command a larger audience. Thus, his concert was booked for the larger CNE stadium. The CNE stadium was built in 1948 with a grandstand at its north end, and later expanded with additional seating in the form of partially covered bleachers (stands) at the south end. The stadium was primarily used for sporting events for most of the year, however for the summer months the CNE grew a tradition of hosting music concerts with some fans seated in the bleachers and the rest in the open air on the pitch.

On the rain-soaked, fateful night of the Sinatra concert (Sunday, 2 September 1984) the event did not transpire as planned. Despite the artist's delayed arrival onstage the 'concert' lasted barely 45 minutes. According to newspaper reports and eye-witness accounts, 15,000 fans had been waiting for several hours in the rain for the singer to appear (Toronto Star, 1984; New York Daily News, 1984). Some had paid as much as \$75CAD for their tickets, not an insignificant price in present day terms, though some observers question whether this amount reflected mark-ups from illicit ticket re-sellers.

Sinatra eventually made his way to the stage, performed a selection of eleven songs that lasted, according to the various accounts, approximately 35 minutes, during which he mumbled and allegedly forgot several of the lyrics. Another ten minutes were taken up by patter between songs and introducing his band, some of whom he misnamed.

Many fans were furious. Some implored the police, who were acting as security, to intervene. The police declined to become involved in what was essentially