TECHNOLOGY – LOOKING OUTSIDE OF THE EVENTS INDUSTRY
Seek inspiration elsewhere to remain cutting edge

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When I'm hunting for new trends for the association and conference industry – the first place I look is anywhere but the industry itself. While plenty of our clients are progressive and open to new ideas – they have often been pitched the usual gambit of social media plans, onsite recording and continued engagement strategies post-event. We're having to try harder all the time to push the envelope of what is engaging and measurable for them as budgets shift and new regulations come into play (Hello GDPR!).

In terms of looking outside our industry, one of the most effective conversations I had recently was with a technical director from within the video games industry. Specifically, we discussed massive multiplayer gaming environments – where thousands of players are engaged together at any one time on a virtual battlefield. How are those players matched together into teams based on their various skill levels? How do they communicate with one another? How can they be encouraged to spend more money within the game? How can they share their success? These are all questions that can be applied to our events industry with fresh eyes.

In application, I would apply the gaming environment to building social communities for our association clients. At this point, we assume most clients will have a dedicated association Facebook page. What's less common, and perhaps more effective, is to start a page non-exclusive to the association – driving it to the larger public audience. This allows members to engage and share their insights with both people directly affected by their area of practice and to in turn hear back from them the impacts of their work. A broader application of this would be to seek out a more customised website forum where members can 'upvote' the most pressing issues and comments in front of their peers. A simple badging system could be used to recognise forum moderators or 'trusted contributors' to build a sense of social status that can be easily visible and most importantly, shared elsewhere.

Continuing with social networks, they remain one of your best tools for new Member / Delegate outreach that is both precise in targeting and measurable in ROI. We have been strongly advising clients for some time now to 'shift' – not reduce – their traditional marketing budgets from printed materials to online campaigns. With the reduced costs of event apps and the increasing sophistication of website design, the necessity for printed onsite materials has fallen dramatically. By foregoing the printing of an abstract book or program guide, and instead forcing use of the mobile app or mobile responsive website, the event budget should allow for trial of online advertisements across the major platforms – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIN, Google Ads and Ad Roll.

Speaking of mobile, I love the implementation of networking into the onsite app when possible. Most major app companies now have a 'social wall' where you can encourage users to link their twitter feeds, etc. into the app feed or simply use the app itself to post personal thoughts and suggestions about the conference. Taken further, allowing the sharing of personal schedules and personal profiles (using tags to showcase what area of expertise individuals are either looking for / have to share) can allow your delegates to schedule 'brain dates' with one another to intentionally network. Provide a dedicated space onsite for one-on-one discussions like

this and I'm certain you'll see it full. I'm sure you'll also decide to add some branded mobile device charging stations near this brain date area to encourage people to both stop by to check out the new space and to remain focused on the in-person connections they are making.

For associations looking to provide additional membership perks, expanding to the online education world offers many benefits such as offering exclusive webinar content and expanding the lifespan and momentum of physical meetings with presentation recordings. Online learning is more affordable for both planners and learners than onsite meetings, which opens the reach of content to new markets and to delegates who cannot afford to attend physical meetings due to timing, travel and / or financial constraints. When prospective clients approach us about creating an online offering for their members, such as a virtual library e-commerce website, we find they also ask about onsite content capture costs, pre- and post-event marketing strategies and revenue projections. Being prepared to answer to, and offer, these services will ideally lead to a competitive edge for PCOs and

a self-funding line item for clients (by attracting paid orders and sponsors) while providing a rich educational resource for association members and the public alike.

Ready to get even more forward thinking? There are some wonderful companies working on applying technologies such as facial recognition, artificial intelligence and RFID tagging to event data. Perhaps most immediately practical is adding RFID tagging to delegate badges and/or exhibit booths to assess traffic patterns and adjust the meeting flow accordingly. I've seen events using this data in the successive year to show exhibitors exactly how much traffic a particular area of the floor is getting and charging according to 'zones' of expected traffic in addition to the traditional upcharge for desirable corner booths, etc. Backing up your pricing by concrete data is always hard to dispute!

In closing, I remain excited about the relentless progression of technology and the implications for traditional event planning. Social media accounts are free to setup and there is no reason why an association should not

be using at least one as a dedicated drip feed of news and promotion. Mobile apps have fallen in price dramatically in the last years with the increase in competition and the standardisation of features – consider what print costs could be skipped in order to afford one. If you cannot afford to host an annual meeting, think about recording some of the presentations to share throughout the next year or host webinars to maintain member engagement.

As I began, my favourite bit of advice is to seek inspiration outside your own industry to remain cutting edge. Talk to a teenager about what keeps them engaged in video gaming and you might just pick up some tips that will change your core business. The youth is indeed the future and we must adjust the presentation of our traditional meetings in a fresh way that speaks to them where they are.