

Digital Strategy for Event Planners

Filling the seats and delivering value without wasting your time

By Randall M. Craig

Today's conventional wisdom is that if you're not Twittering, YouTubing, Facebooking, Tik-Tokking, and LinkingIn your annual conference, you've missed the boat. While there is some truth to the statement, too often these tools are not used strategically, and have little return. This is even more true today when so many meetings are delivered virtually. In this article, we review practical ways to use social media for your event: planning it, promoting it, delivering it, and after it's over.

Planning the Event

How are event themes, speakers and educational tracks determined at your association? Usually this is delegated to a committee composed of volunteers, staff and perhaps trusted advisors. If the committee chooses the right combination for the program, the perceived value of the event, and the attendance, the event rises. If the committee makes the wrong choice, your event is in trouble.

While it may seem risky to ask members directly, using social media tools to reach out to members and other potential attendees can generate buzz, collect data, and enhance affinity. People are more likely to attend if they have a say in setting the agenda. How to do this? Conduct an online survey on key issues in the industry, asking about preferred topics and soliciting speaker recommendations. Or solicit feedback in a zoom focus group. Or start up discussions in a forum or blog. Blogs have the advantage that they are automatically syndicated across the Internet, spreading awareness even farther. Your planning committee can consider the feedback when making its decisions. The data can validate great decisions — and help avoid bad ones.

Promotion

One of the basic tenets of digital marketing is that instead of being broadcast from one point, a message should be designed so readers can pass it on. Consider these ideas:

- Create an event blog to keep everyone up to date. In addition to posting text, ask speakers to supply value-adding content such as video clips. The blog can be easily syndicated across the Internet to promote awareness of the event, and improve the search engine rankings of the event website itself.
- Be careful not to allow the blog to be perceived as an advertising channel rather than a preview of the great value offered by the event.
- Announce your event on relevant discussion forums, including on LinkedIn groups.
- Create a family of social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter) tied together so that when one is updated, all are. Since you don't know where on the Web your attendees spend their time, creating a broad, integrated presence ensures that attendees will find you when they come looking for you.
- As a speaker, I spend time researching each audience to whom I present. What are their key issues? What are they hoping to learn from me? What are their challenges? Yes, the answers can be gathered through one-on-one over-the-phone interviews, which I do. But if the meeting planner establishes a forum, prospective attendees can share directly what they are looking for—and I can immediately respond. The result is in a more customized presentation by me coupled with audience pre-engagement that translates into more registrations for the event.
- While associations use their magazines and newsletters to promote conferences, they should engage other media as well to get out the message. Mainstream media (including

trade publications) can generate articles that can be linked to or cross-posted. Bloggers may want to do pre-interviews leading up to the conference. And, of course, the board, staff, and key volunteers can comment on each other's blogs and tweets, driving interest further.

A word about the online registration process: The user interface for the process is too often designed by programmers, not marketers. While making it easy to transact is the primary goal, the opportunity to build in social media functionality — tell-a-friend, up-selling, cross-selling, access to “private” content and discussion groups — should not be overlooked. The most powerful promoter for your event is someone who has just made a purchase. Why not generate a testimonial just after a transaction by asking why the registrant decided to attend the event.

Delivering the Event

Social media can play five important roles during a conference:

1. Generating **publicity** for the event and the association
2. Enhancing the learning process of attendees
3. Expanding the event to include remote attendees
4. Capturing content for a **virtual community**
5. Capturing content to be used to **market future events**

Publicity: Invite influential bloggers as well as mainstream media to your event. Doing this early allows them to publicize the event, further driving attendance. Finally, instead of a traditional press release, use a “social media press release.”

Learning process: In addition to creating discussion forums for educational tracks, consider having a “Twitter wall” for each presentation. This is a projection screen off to the side, with a computer running a Twitter management program (look at Walls.io). This will display tweets about the presentation from both local and remote attendees. This, of course, only works if the speaker is comfortable receiving feedback on the fly. Hint: Place a separate monitor in front of the speaker so he or she can follow the feedback without having to turn away from the audience. For live-streamed virtual presentations, the “Twitter wall” is really just the chat box. For large audiences, insist that the speaker have an assistant to actively respond on this backchannel.

Remote attendees: There is a vast difference between the streaming platforms, and many events are now being delivered 100% virtual or as hybrids. Consider the benefits of

streaming some of the event as a Facebook Live Event or YouTube Live Event, as a way to reach more attendees, or as a way to provide a “taste” of the paid event.

Post-event virtual community: Using smartphones, a team of roving “reporters” can interview speakers, dignitaries and audience members throughout the event. Or, remote attendees can be asked to create their own videos with key learning points, feedback, etc. The snippets can then be uploaded into YouTube, Facebook, Tik Tok, and elsewhere. Microbloggers can give a running commentary on particular workshops, and bloggers can do summaries and session reviews.

Future marketing: Much of the content and other information generated during an event can be repurposed for future event marketing. Testimonials are particularly important. For in-person video testimonials, instead of presenting a waiver to be signed, ask for permission right on camera before posing your first question. And for virtual (eg Zoom) presentations, at the end of the presentation, why not ask all participants to type their feedback directly into the chat box?

After the Event

The goal of the annual event is to bind attendees closer to the organization through networking, professional development and community building. Social media can play a powerful role by capturing the excitement (and learning) for those who couldn't attend in person. At the same time, it can provide an interactive extension of the conference for this same group.

One way to do this is to ensure that the event's pictures, videos, speaker hand-outs, transcripts and interviews are recorded and archived. Another is to establish a discussion forum where communities of interest can develop.

From an event model to an online community... and back

The pandemic has caused many organizations to fast-forward their move from a pure “event” model, to one that fosters a greater sense of community. Social media helps wire people together, and can provide that “jolt” of energy that helps make this happen. When it is up and running, this community becomes the planning and marketing arena for events held throughout the year: a virtuous cycle.

As many organizations are now becoming more comfortable with virtual and hybrid conferences, social media becomes an even more important ingredient for a successful event — if used strategically.

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