

Invest in event planning not just event marketing

Many organizations, especially nonprofits and associations, focus on having one annual event that is meant to be a fundraiser or a idea-raiser. Events are a great way to publicize an organization, get people together, and provide value to attendees. Except when the events don't go well. And that is a big exception.

Unfortunately, many events have better publicity than planning, and that is guaranteed to backfire. What I mean is that event organizers spend inordinate amounts of time and money to make sure that people know and attend a conference, and spend much less time and money on the logistics of the event.

This past Saturday, I attended a "women's conference." It had a very nice website, and was going to deal with some intriguing subject matter (women and politics, women in developing countries, etc.) I believed the hype and bought my ticket (also, I had a very nice discount from a friend involved with the group).

First indication of a problem was the disparity of information between the ticket and the website. One said the program started at 8:30, the other that registration started then, and the program at 9:45. Neither was right.

Lesson: Make sure the details are correct, and that everyone has the same information.

The people who were involved with greeting and registering were doing neither when I arrived at 8:50. Badges were still being put out. No one handed me a program. It was disorganized.

The program did not start until 10:15. From there, everything ran late. No one thought to tell people where the breakout sessions would be, and one was on a different floor (the session I was signed up for).

Lesson: Timing matters.

The “panelists” for the session I attended were sitting and chatting amongst themselves for 25 minutes, ignoring the fact that 40 people were sitting and waiting for them to start.

Lesson: Explain expectations to presenters.

And then there was the issue of lunch. It was supposed to be “grab and go.” I am vegetarian and guess what, there was not a single vegetarian option to be found.

Lesson: If you are going to offer food (and there is no other food available on site) then you have to consider dietary restrictions.

The bottom line is that the event organizers did not pay attention to the organization aspect of running an event. While I am sure that some people got some value from this particular event, these lapses in logistics wasted my time (and my money).

Event planners pay attention to every last detail from food choice and availability to coat checks to bathroom locations. Event marketers, on the other hand, are focused on getting registrations. Both are EQUALLY important. **If you sacrifice planning for publicity, you will have a disorganized event. If you sacrifice publicity for planning, you will have a poorly attended event.** Either scenario will create PR headaches for you later on.

In my case, I will probably never attend this particular women’s conference again. My perception of the event and its organizers is that they were more focused on the bottom line

than on making sure everything went smoothly for the attendees.

If you are organizing an event, be sure you spend as much time planning it as you do publicizing it. And PS, event planning is a skill. Get qualified/experienced people to help plan your event. It does pay off.

It's when you do it

Sometimes we are all about the how and why, and we forget about the when. When is just as important.

Timing can really make a difference in what you do. Yesterday, I watched a salesman be turned away by a restaurant manager because as she said "we are in the middle of lunch service." If your beat is restaurants, shouldn't you be aware of when is a good time to visit said restaurants? It seems logical that a restaurant will be busy during lunch and dinner. If you do nightclubs, you would not go after 9 p.m. Right?

The same idea applies to events. Plan your event for a time when people are able to attend. If you are trying to get busy professionals, perhaps daytime is not a good time. In busy places like Washington DC you can never really find a day that doesn't have an event already planned. You can't avoid all events, but you should avoid planning events too close to other similar events. For instance, a local medical organization may want to avoid planning an event on the same day as a local surgeon's meeting. There may be too much

crossover.

Timing will affect how your message is received and whether its effective. If you invite people to an event with one day's notice, you are going to lose a lot of possible attendees. Similarly, publicizing an event too far in advance will guarantee people will forget about it.

Putting out a press release on a Friday is a good way to bury it, and in my opinion, doing it on Monday achieves the same result.

So next time you are busy planning a communication strategy or an event, go beyond the what, where, how and why and think about the when.

