

Take Your
Convention
and Expo
From

Good





Great

An economic downturn separates the great shows from the merely good ones —and only the great shows are sure to survive. Make sure yours is one of them.

By Sam Lippman

Today's global recession is negatively affecting conventions and exhibitions worldwide. Because associations depend on their annual conventions and exhibitions for much of their operating funds, every association executive director and president is asking the same question: How deep will this recession go, and how long will it last? The prediction among several economists is that it will bottom out through the fall and take more than a year to recover.

But association executives also are asking another pertinent question: How will this recession affect future conventions and exhibitions? And a few courageous executives are asking themselves and their leadership teams the ultimate question: What must we do now to position our convention/exhibition so it will fill the future needs of our exhibitors and

attendees when we come out of this recession?

These bold, strategic executives know that this recession is the perfect opportunity to make the tough changes they need to move their conventions and exhibitions from good to great. They realize that today's business climate of fear, uncertainty, slashed budgets, and reduced expectations gives them iron-clad justifications and urgent impetus to redesign and improve their convention or exhibition and take it to new levels of quality and success.

Here are some ideas to get you and your team started, based on my almost 30 years of experience on staff or as a consultant providing strategic guidance to association-owned and -managed conventions and exhibitions in industries as diverse as consumer electronics, contact lenses, packaging machinery, printing presses, and wireless technology.

These suggestions are fine tuned by the proven strategies and best practices of convention and exhibition experts.

Strategic Planning

The first and most important step is to institute and execute a structured strategic planning process. At a minimum, this process must include qualitative and quantitative research, objective SWOT and gap analysis, and honest and thorough post-event evaluation that results in actions to improve your next event.

Also, it's essential to continually invest in researching your event's stakeholders to gauge their satisfaction. Discover their reasons and priorities for exhibiting or attending your event and understand their expectations and whether you are meeting them. Are they getting their return on investment? Are you in the city and venue of their choice? Are they receiving the content they need, when they want it?

Only by knowing this information can you offer them an event that they cannot get anywhere else by any other means. If your event doesn't rank first or second with your attendees and exhibitors, use your research to adjust and fine tune your unique selling proposition to get it there. This recession will likely kill off all but the most important exhibitions and conventions.

Once you know what your exhibitors and attendees want—and what you need to do to surpass their expectations—draft a three-year strategic plan for your event. This plan must be linked to the strategic plan of your association as well as your research and conclusions. After each of your events, revisit the next two years of your plan and add a third year. This “living document” will allow your team to schedule a multiple-year rollout of new benefits for your convention and exhibition, designed to meet your customers' needs and expectations. These benefits may include invitation-only executive events, educational programs and focused training courses, customized promotion packages and special help with the media, or colocations with allied meetings.

The Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association did exactly this. “As co-owner of the largest automotive aftermarket tradeshow in North America, we decided on having an offsite strategic thinking/planning exercise with volunteer leaders and professional staff from our association and our partner organization to identify the value proposition of our show to exhibitors and buyers. We used an outside facilitator to help us create the agenda and meeting format that would engage a diverse group of individuals and channel their input into an action-oriented plan. This one-day meeting delivered the results we were looking for,” says Richard D. White, senior vice president of marketing and member relations.

Attendee Acquisition

Professional marketers are a key success factor behind most great conventions and exhibitions. These marketing professionals use all the available traditional and new media tools to get their event's unique selling proposition in front of potential attendees. They push this message out consistently and to targeted demographics. Here are a few of the fundamentals:

- Use your research to determine your convention's or exhibition's three most-important attendee cohorts. Then create educational programs that include the tools each cohort (and their customers) needs to survive this recession and beyond.
- Market aggressively, consistently, and via targeted messages to these cohorts, telling them these career-saving tools can only be obtained by attending your convention or exhibition. Make sure all your marketing materials get to the point quickly and include detailed benefits, answering these two questions: What's in it for me? Why should I come to your event? Great marketers never let down their guard and never assume that last year's attendees will register and attend this year's event.

The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons took this approach. According to Director of Convention and Meeting Services Susan McSorley, even though its annual meeting was doing very well, AAOS wanted to ensure that it continued to provide value to all stakeholders. “We stepped back and conducted a strategic review of the entire meeting,” she says. “We did extensive primary research, which included interviews with staff, volunteers, attendees, speakers, and exhibitors, as well as quantitative surveys of attendees, nonattendees, exhibitors, and nonexhibitors.”

Based on the comprehensive review and SWOT analysis, some improvements were made, which included, among others, increasing the prominence and frequency of the meeting's promotion and developing an exhibitor directory.

Exhibit and Sponsorship Sales

The days of “build it and they will come” are over. More associations are replacing order takers with experienced sales professionals who understand and have contacts in their industry. They compensate these professionals according to their success. The top association-run exhibitions are where they are because of these basics of modern collaborative selling:

- Dispatch senior staff annually to visit your biggest exhibitors/sponsors in their offices. Do not ask for their money; ask them how your association and its convention or exhibition can help their company survive this recession. Some associations have created “key account teams” that call on their biggest exhibitors/sponsors to listen to what these companies need. Then they create a custom package of exhibit space, advertising, sponsorships, and other promotional opportunities to help these companies achieve their objectives.
- Empower your staff to increase your exhibitors' ROI. Hire an outside company to audit your event's attendance and provide this information

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to your exhibitors. Use an ROI toolkit to help exhibitors set measurable objectives for your exhibition. With audited attendance numbers and data from the ROI toolkit, exhibitors can more accurately budget for the appropriate exhibit space and staffing to achieve their objectives.

PMMI, which produces the PACK EXPO, started offering its exhibitors education tools. "We know that helping exhibitors succeed means they are more likely to exhibit at our next show. Because of this, we view exhibitor education not as an expense, but an investment in exhibit sales for our next show," says Jim Pittas, vice president of tradeshow.

One of PMMI's most successful exhibitor educational tools has been its *Exhibitor Success Guide*. This guide—available online, via email, and in print—has short articles from 10 marketing experts on topics such as setting measurable objectives, preshow promotion, selecting and training booth staff, and effective post-show lead follow-up. "These articles, plus a comprehensive marketing and communications calendar and checklist, have helped our exhibitors increase their return on investment from our shows," he says.

Communications

Because of budget cuts and travel-fund freezes from the recession, it's even more important to aggressively promote your convention or exhibition's unique selling proposition to the media. The following strategies are working for associations:

- Task a senior staff member with a three-year goal of developing relationships internationally with the most influential media, both traditional and new, in your space. Allocate the time and budget so this

person can attend major conventions and exhibitions around the world to keep your event top of mind with foreign editors. This person will become your association's—and your event's—international representative as he or she meets key editors to learn what readers and advertisers need overseas.

- Provide new research and whitepapers for your industry. During difficult times, associations and their conventions and exhibitions provide a safe gathering place to chart their industry's course and to be the bully pulpit for an industry to communicate its message.

Staff Building

None of the above can be done without a top-notch team. This is basic, but it cannot be emphasized enough. Successful associations understand they do not own patents, manufacture goods, or create intellectual property—they provide intangible services that tangentially support these activities. So the only competitive edge they can invest in is their staff. The following staffing approaches have helped associations and their events keep their ascending momentum:

- Upgrade personnel through training or new hires so they have the vision to identify new opportunities, the courage to cut programs, and the tact to sever relationships and let go of employees who are not performing. Hire senior-level people who have been embedded in your industry and who have the experience and gravitas to lead and inspire confidence among your exhibitors and attendees during these difficult times.
- Outsource everything that can be done more efficiently by others. Retain staff with the specific

skill sets, knowledge, and contacts needed to keep your convention or exhibition relevant to your industry. Then delegate to them the authority and accountability—and allocate the budget necessary—to build a team of contractors, freelancers, and consultants with the passion, energy, curiosity, and flexibility to ensure your convention and exhibition stay fresh and relevant every time.

Even in good times, it is not easy to produce a convention or exhibition. After all, there are so many moving parts (e.g., strategy, marketing, educational programming, exhibit sales, logistics, hotels, airlines, venues, and unions) that must come together all at once in the same place so attendees, speakers, exhibitors, sponsors, and producers benefit.

In today's times, it is even harder to produce a convention or exhibition, and if you try to produce it the same way you have in the past, it is bound to fail. So now is the perfect occasion, using the recession as your justification, to invest the time, energy, and budget to reengineer your event. And because some of your competitors are playing it safe, you can steal market share from them by upgrading the planning, marketing, and production of your convention or exhibition. Remember: Only the great conventions and exhibitions will survive beyond today. **an**

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