

In-Depth Look at the Event Experience: What Marketers Want



MEETINGS & EVENTS

In-Depth Look at the Event Experience: What Marketing Owners Want

With the current pace of business high and competition fierce, marketing event professionals need to use every tool available to acquire and engage with clients and educate and motivate sales representatives. Events remain a core device for marketing – utilizing emerging technology, unique spaces, new destinations, and quality content to connect clients to brands and drive outcomes. There are challenges to be faced, however.

Event activity continues to increase faster than budgets, and there is a constant refrain of “do more with less” among professionals responsible for meetings and events.¹ To gain a better understanding of top challenges and best practices, we conducted in-depth interviews with marketing event owners to hear, in their own words, what is important to them when creating events. This report will explore key findings about how they tackle some of the bigger issues – setting objectives, measuring outcomes, and designing unique experiences while balancing the realities of logistics and budget.



A Note About Qualitative Research

Unlike surveys and other data collection methods, qualitative research is not designed to be statistically representative. Rather, the purpose of these in-depth interviews is to understand the range of perspectives and experiences of marketers, in their own voices. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes and insights in this report are from 15 in-depth interviews with marketing event owners in the US and Europe.



Innovation Opportunities

Marketers are often running two “streams” of events. These event streams are distinct in scope and management, and pose different opportunities for innovation.

The first event stream is programmatic; these are meetings operated with regularity, comprising the foundational events for the organization. For example, a business may exhibit in the same convention each year, or operate a large user conference annually. These events are the mainstays of the organization’s effort to maintain a strong brand presence. Programmatic meetings are often much larger and operate with an eye to incremental improvements, with budgets that are generally in line with spend from prior years.

The second event stream consists of ad hoc meetings and events planned and executed “on demand” to meet the immediate needs of the business. These

ad hoc events are often smaller, involve quick turn-arounds, and offer some opportunity for creativity and experimentation. Marketers often report there is no set budget for ad hoc events; when the internal stakeholder makes the request, marketing will recommend an event design and associated budget to be approved. Timing can be the hardest challenge to overcome with ad hoc events.

“The product team will come to me and want to do an event to launch a new feature set, for example. We’ll be 10 weeks out from the launch date, so even though they’ll want to be splashy and creative, and may even have a little leeway in terms of budget, by the time we get the basics of the event in place, there’s not a lot of time to be really innovative.”

Marketing executive, US

Tip:

Since ad hoc meetings are often on very tight timelines and frequently have a significant number of details to manage, adding new ideas may feel overwhelming or risky to the event owner. Consider identifying a few smaller events and using those to test ideas on a small scale to see what works, then roll out the winning ideas to larger events.



Doing More With Less – Planning Smaller Events to Increase Impact

In addition to the use of smaller events to meet ad hoc demands from their internal stakeholders, marketers are purposefully choosing to operate smaller meetings in order to “do more with less” and engage more deeply with clients. Smaller events allow for more flexibility in destination, venue, experience design, and attendee engagement - offering marketers new opportunities to connect in real and personal ways with their intended audience. This is especially true for segments where the attendee group requires high-touch, highly-personalized experiences. Marketers deploying these smaller events are enthusiastic about their impact, and they anticipate utilizing the model more extensively in future years.



“We call every single buyer we want to invite to the event. They spend half a million Euros on a single piece of our equipment – we call them. We know who’s coming. We know what they want out of the meeting. We know what they like to do in the evenings. Our meeting budgets may be small compared to other firms, but we have 70% to 80% come back the next time we invite them.”

Marketing executive, Europe

One common strategy for streamlining smaller events is to create a “meeting template” that can be used to reproduce a similar event with a different audience. One non-profit in the EU manages community stakeholder events regionally, taking similar design and content to various cities to engage local influencers. A global B2B technology firm designs a “microevent” for one client, then re-uses the concept for other large clients. The marketing team achieves its goal of delivering personally engaging, intimate events, but is able to find efficiency and scalability across a larger audience.

“I’m able to incorporate amazing new approaches at a micro level because I plan to reuse the approach with other audiences. I design the first micro-event, then do a “rinse and repeat” with several other specific groups. It’s a new experience for everyone, and it feels very special and personal because it’s such a small group at each event.”

Marketing executive, US

Tip:

When tailoring an event, first put yourself in your attendees’ shoes and really try to understand why they will come to your event and what the personal drivers are that will help them (and you) achieve the desired outcomes. Creating attendee personas – like the “tech savvy networker” or the “knowledge seeker” – can be a good way to identify ways to personalize the event content and experience for maximum impact.

Attendance Uncertainty

Marketers discussed the meeting components that introduce uncertainty into an event – everything from weather, air travel, venues, vendors, and the attendees themselves. The heart of this uncertainty, however, sits squarely on the variance between expected and actual event attendance. With an entire meeting planned around the size of the group, the best-planned event can be sabotaged by attendance that is significantly lower, or higher, than anticipated. Accommodating these variances without compromising the experience of the attendees requires marketers to redesign events in real time. Venues and vendors that are agile, creative, and understanding are highly valued and will be viewed as preferred partners for future events.

Solving for attendance variance is especially challenging for ad hoc events. With tight timelines and no legacy attendance to draw from, marketers must set goals for attendance without a baseline. This is a considerable source of stress for the marketing team, who must be prepared to make real-time adjustments for over- or under-attendance, both of which can have a negative impact on attendee engagement.

The ability to more accurately predict attendance is an area of opportunity consistently identified by marketers. Developing a means to reliably anticipate who and how many will attend would significantly improve the ability of marketers to develop a compelling event (while simultaneously providing peace of mind). Some marketers manage this by investing in highly individualized attendee engagement prior to the event – phone calls to present the meeting concept and issue a personal invitation, ongoing pre-event discussion, gathering attendee input into meeting design and content, and developing personalized activities and content to encourage highly-engaged, participative attendees. This is a resource-intense approach that is very difficult to scale, limiting application to small, highly-specialized events that are deemed to be worth the effort and investment. The payoff, however, can be significant.

"We had an event last year – we expected 200 people and rented a large venue. Maybe we didn't give people enough time to plan to attend, maybe we didn't market the event enough. We had a much smaller number show up. We couldn't get out of the contract with the venue. It would have looked embarrassingly sparse in the space. Luckily, they were able to find a way to curtain off a big section of the room. From now on we will only work with venues that already have the ability to subdivide the space."

Marketing executive, Europe

Tip:

Having a strong pre-event communication plan can help generate excitement and encourage attendance. However, when you aren't confident about your attendee numbers, it is important to have a fallback plan. Consider working with venues and other supplier partners to develop scenarios for adapting to an unexpected decrease or increase in attendance.



Event Objectives - Sales, Engagement, and Insights

When discussing event objectives, marketers consider three general categories: sales, engagement, and insights. Some events aim to impact multiple categories; however, there is typically one that rises as the primary objective for the event. Sales goals involve sourcing leads and opportunities for business development teams. These outcomes are often associated with exhibiting at, or sponsoring, a broader industry event; the objective is to fill the prospect funnel and find interested leads for sales or marketing to sell to, following the event.

Marketers focusing on engagement are designing for brand awareness, product/solution utilization, and depth/breadth of client relationships. These events may be proprietary to the organization and the attendees are often current clients.

Finally, events that prioritize insights as a key objective take the “engagement” goal to the next level – with the organization designing the meeting to encourage clients to share needs, priorities, and concerns. These insights are taken back into the organization to inform product, sales, and client engagement strategies, enabling the organization to engage more effectively with individual clients.

SALES: “Setting goals is a team effort with Sales. I ask them how many prospect meetings they want to generate through the event. They'll tell me what their goal is based on overall objectives and their capacity. No one assigns me the objective – we have it because I make sure we're setting a goal.”

Marketing executive, US

ENGAGEMENT: “We use another event to engage influencers – we are establishing ourselves as thought leaders in this space. We want these people consuming our content, following our experts, posting about us on social media.”

Marketing executive, US

INSIGHTS: “We limit attendance to 100 people. This gives us the opportunity to have great conversations. We get a lot of information from our clients. It helps us understand how to teach them about our products better – how to help them use the products they've bought from us. It helps us understand what they need next, and how to design the next generation of technology for them.”

Marketing executive, Europe





Measurement approaches are vastly different across the three categories. For sales objectives, “line of sight” metrics such as leads captured, sales meetings scheduled, number of booth visitors, or number of product/solution demos are easily measured and are considered satisfactory indicators of event success. Session attendance, social media posts, influencer engagement, and survey results are often used to evaluate engagement results, while insights historically have been highly qualitative and much less specific.

Event-generated insights enable the ability to deepen client relationships, improve profitability, and deliver high-value, streamlined solutions to clients. If insights are the goal, it is important to have a strong facilitator for a large group, or thoughtful moderators for breakouts and small groups who can capture and process client input. Event debriefs among company representatives immediately following insight-driven events are also important to capture the client input while it's still fresh.

Tip:

Every event, large and small, should include planned and purposeful measurement points based on objectives set before planning begins. A pre/post event survey methodology can help measure behavior change against key goals. For example, if the goal is to educate on a new product, you can ask attendees to indicate their level of knowledge before and after the event to see if there was a shift. Your event mobile app, or emerging tools like facial recognition, can be used to capture real-time feedback during the event.

Creating the Attendee Experience

When considering the desired attendee experience for an event, marketers seem to take one of two approaches. A few approach the attendee experience from a conceptual perspective – a key design theme that weaves through all of the critical attendee touchpoints of the event. For example, one marketer whose events are aimed at entrepreneurs and small business owners makes sure every aspect of the event reinforces the use of innovative small businesses wherever possible.

"We create a story that flows through every aspect of the meeting. For example, if the topic is supporting small businesses in the community, even the meals become a supporting part of the story. We'll bring in a fresh new restaurant to create a meal that is not only delicious, but helps tell the story about the journey of that restaurant. Maybe the wine and ingredients are part of the story too. It all has to tie together."

Marketing executive, Europe

Other marketers tie attendee experience to the desired perception of their brand. A non-profit organization might work to design a highly-engaging

event on an appropriately-practical budget, using donated space, with limited decoration, technology, and production, while offering deep, rich content from well-respected thought leaders. Conversely, a FinTech firm might operate an event for bankers and venture capitalists at a luxury property, with high-end catering, cutting-edge technology, and top-of-the-line production quality. One element consistently emphasized in the effort to deliver an excellent attendee experience is the meeting content, which marketers agree must be highly-compelling and delivered by an engaging speaker who is respected (or ideally, esteemed) by the audience.

Tip:

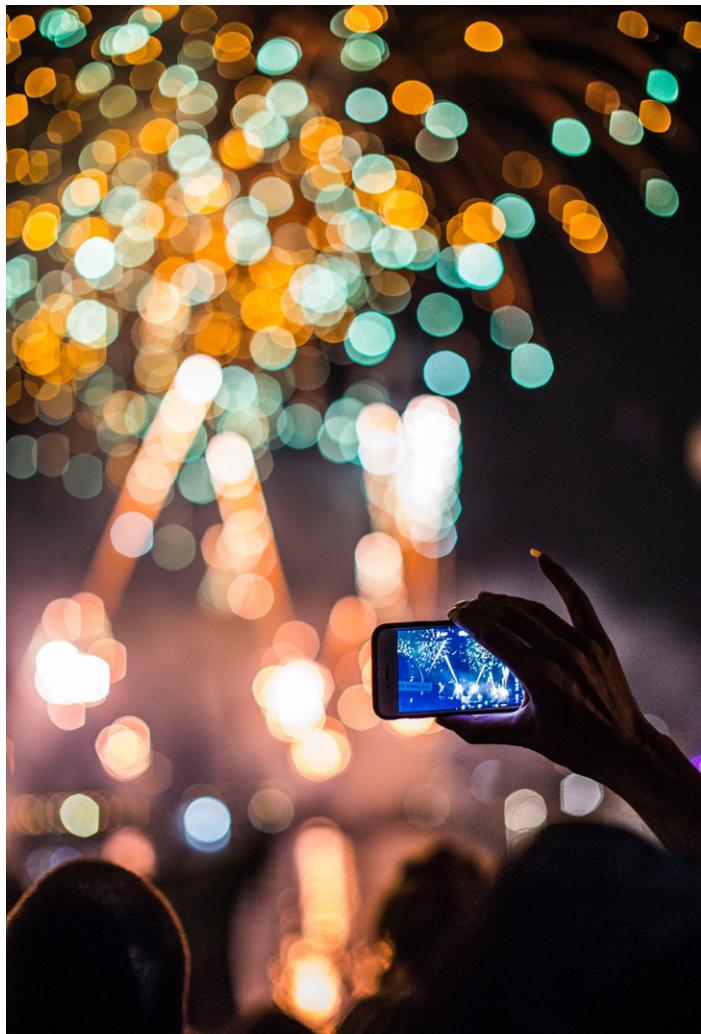
There is no good story – or event – without a plot. Take time upfront to map out your vision for the event based on your brand, your desired outcomes, and the story you want to tell. To inspire the creative elements, create a visual “mood board” to communicate the feeling and environment you want to craft for attendees. Whatever your story, deliver it consistently throughout the event so the experience reinforces the message.



Live Streaming to Enhance an Event

When discussing the future of technology for their meetings and events, marketers frequently point to live streaming content and sessions as a gap they'd prioritize to solve. Live streaming can be used to include compelling speakers who would otherwise be unable to attend the event, or to allow prospective attendees to attend and participate if they aren't able to be on site.

There is a perception that live streaming sessions are highly complex and can carry a significant risk of failure. The livestream itself requires expertise, equipment, and services. If there's any expectation of interaction with attendees, this adds another level of complexity. Additionally, it may be a disincentive for the intended audience to attend in person, cannibalizing on the overall attendance goals for the meeting.



"One thing we would love to have is more flexibility to have people attending remotely. I know you can stream presentations online, but I'm not just talking about video. I'd hope that in the future, technology enables us to have people really experience and participate in the event remotely. Video and conference calls aren't even reliable today, in 2019, for a single meeting, much less an event with multiple tracks. I don't know what the solution is, but I know we aren't there yet."

Marketing executive, Europe

Tip:

Not every meeting type is a good fit for live streaming, so it is important to consider the objectives, attendees, and desired experience upfront. If you do add a live streaming component to your event, it is a good idea to treat it like a separate, but connected, part of your event design. What do you want your virtual attendees to learn, feel, and experience? How do you want them to interact with live event attendees? How do you need to adapt the content so it will be compelling in a live stream environment? If not carefully planned, virtual attendees could feel excluded and quickly disengage.

Conclusion

What do marketers want? The real answer is they want it all – an immersive experience, flawless execution, and to move the needle on key business goals. To work to achieve it all, the last tip is simple: start with “why.” Why are you having this event? This foundational objective – the “one thing” the event should accomplish – will serve as your guide post through every aspect of the event planning process. Assessing each decision against your objective will help you prioritize the most important elements to create an experience that is focused, meaningful, and consistently delivered.



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