

Clearing a Passage through Today's "Frozen" Economy

By Michael Dotson, CEO
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We are facing challenges in our economy the likes of which have not been experienced in most of our lifetimes. News stories seem to bounce from bad to worse to hope to despair, leaving relatively rare moments of optimism and huge holes of uncertainty. The primary result of this combined "gloom and doom" assault has rendered many businesses paralyzed with a sense of fear for the present and the future. Such paralysis has slowed the progress of even the most (formerly) dynamic of companies to a crawl. Economists are left scratching their heads unsure of what to do, and Marketing Departments for many companies appear to be more preoccupied with job preservation than re-establishment of momentum. As professionals, how do we "break away" from this stagnation and take advantage of opportunities to grow our business?

1. Understand the Terrain

Wikipedia defines Trench Warfare as "a form of warfare where both combatants have fortified positions and fighting lines are static". The key word here is *static*. By recognizing and accepting that businesses have hunkered down and that the static lines in our economy are likely to remain for the foreseeable future, you can begin to develop a path that will enable your business to move forward.

2. Recognize that Early Progress Could Be Agonizingly Slow

With a robust economy, success could not happen fast enough. In World War I, forward tactical advancement had often been measured in feet or sometime inches – so it is in the economic "trenches" of today. Given our current situation, it may seem that everything is happening in *slow motion*. Your business plan must take into consideration a reduced pace of progress. Sustainable success can best be achieved through a series of *small victories*.

3. Lose the Fear!

A good insurance salesperson knows that fear is a strong motivator. It is also understood that fear is an emotion that needs to be brought under control or it will lead to distress and high anxiety. This does not mean that apprehension should be abandoned, but it does mean that your success will be determined by how you deal with not only your fears, but your approach in dealing with the fears of your customers, clients, *and competitors*. The sense of fear will begin to move from the forefront as you focus your attention on your immediate plan of action.

4. Be Different

There is a common adage that goes something like – *performing the same action repeatedly with the expectation of a different outcome is a definition of insanity*. What may have worked for us last year, last week, or even yesterday may not work in today's economic climate. Take deliberate steps to be different in your approach. Breaking from the routine will cause you to begin looking at your business with a fresher perspective.

5. Be a Puzzle Solver

Sudoku and crosswords can be stimulating ways to pass time. Treating your business as a puzzle to be solved can add a new dimension to your efforts. Writing down specific problems to be *solved* then writing down your solutions can often lead to unexpected and creative results.

6. Every Business Has a Story to Tell

Whether it is your business or your customer's, there is a story that needs to be told. One of the best ways to get that story out is through the creative use of *Public Relations*. PR does not have to be an expensive proposition. PR companies are feeling the slowdown like everyone else, and are looking for new clients like never before. Using their professional services on a *per event* basis could give your business greater exposure with minimal expense. Also, remember that a well crafted and timed *Press Release* can reward you with huge dividends.

7. Make Technology Work for You

Nearly every business has a *data base* of email addresses – including yours. These may consist of customers, clients, friends, or others whom you connect with on a regular basis. *Email Marketing* is a proven cost effective way to get your business message in front of your data base. There are many ways to take advantage of this relatively new kind of marketing such as email blasts or even the newest form of Email Marketing – emailable Video (Video Brochures). To reach a larger audience, many companies offer *opted in* email lists that can be quite specific for a given type of business or customer. You should avoid bulk email lists, which are often associated with *Spam* (very different than opted in pre-qualified lists). The creative use of Email could become the most cost effective method for you to promote your business.

8. Direct Mail Still Works

Even with rising Postal costs, *direct mail* can be a very effective way to get your message out to a broad area. A number of companies offer quality mailing lists with relatively low cost. Keep in mind that when you decide to do a bulk mail, your response will nearly always be a very small percentage of the number of pieces that you mail out. Sometimes they can be a fraction of a percent, but that is often enough to justify the expense.

9. Know Your Competition Better Than They Know You

Staying on top of your competition is now more important than ever. Rest assured that your competitor's are experiencing the same economic anxiety as you, and may be dealing with it in ways that you should be aware of. There is much that you can learn by simply observing how your competitor's are changing *their approach* to how they do business.

10. There is No Substitute for Homework!

The Internet is the single greatest research tool ever developed. A certain part of every business day needs to be devoted to conducting research online. By using the resources of the Internet daily, you will be able to stay informed of the many subtleties pertaining to your business. You will be able to learn about new products, technology, and other pertinent information that can help give you a competitive edge. The Internet can also provide a wealth of historical information regarding all aspects of your business (and that of your competitor's).

Clearly, there is no single magic way out of our current economic mess. One thing is certain – *doing nothing will produce nothing and doing little will produce little!* But just like a Magician who diligently practices the complexities of a new card trick until perfected, the result of you working smart and paying attention to the little victories can bring a gasp from your "Audience" and the resulting question "how did you do that?"

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Emerging Technologies that will Impact Tradeshows in the next Twelve Months

By Michelle Bruno, CEM

If there ever was a time for technology to come to the aid of an industry, the time is NOW. While exhibition organizers have always had a keen eye for their return on investment in technology, in the past they may have paid as much attention to the "cool" factor of a particular application, as they have its ability to solve a critical problem. Going forward, however, emerging technologies will have to work harder to address issues such as declining attendance, the face-to-face value proposition, extending the life of the event and reaching out to the next generation of participants in order to get an organizer's attention.

Social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked In and others will continue to impact exhibitions in a general way. However, the next generation of social media tools has adapted information sharing and social networking practices to the exhibition environment. These new platforms move users from the public to the private sphere. In contrast to the public platforms such as Facebook or Linked In, whose users and group members may or may not attend the event, these tools become useful after the community (trade show attendees, for example) opts in.

Denver-based Zerista provides trade show organizers with a social media engine for their existing Web sites. Their “private label” platform offers tools for social networking, personalized scheduling, exhibitor/attendee interaction and event mapping under the look and feel of the existing brand. The Zerista tools are Web-based via a software as a service (SaaS) platform. “It’s about making the most of a real world event. It helps participants increase networking from forty to eighty percent and utilize time more effectively. They can find the right content faster, attend the events they want to attend, see who else is attending and search for like-minded people,” says John Kanarowski, president of Zerista.

Thanks in part to the popularity of Apple’s iPhone, event-specific mobile phone applications may be the hottest emerging technology of 2009. Core-apps with offices in Maryland, Virginia and Texas, has developed a downloadable app for the iPhone called Follow Me, with networking, information sharing and marketing features for attendees and exhibitors including personalized schedules, interactive show floor maps, access to social media tools such as Twitter, coupons from local merchants, exhibitor advertising and digital brochure storage. Trade show organizers benefit from the enhanced interaction between exhibitors and attendees as well as the ability to communicate with participants before, during and after the show. Core-apps offer organizers a revenue sharing opportunity on the \$1.99 download.

Software as a Service applications are also an option for information delivery to a smartphone or any device with a Web browser. Rather than downloading a native application that resides on the device, tools are accessed via the Internet. Interactive Mobile Solutions has developed an application called ConferenceConnect, to link conference organizers, attendees and speakers. Their platform gives attendees instant access to the conference agenda, speaker bios and local information. Presenters and attendees can interact with each other during the session or through surveys and social networking tools after the session. Organizers can make changes to the conference schedule and receive immediate feedback from attendees.

ChirpE, developed by Columbia, MD-based A2Z, Inc. is another Web-based application for smartphones that optimizes event Web site content for a handheld device. ChirpE allows users to access exhibitor and product information. Its “buzz” feature allows users to report on the event using Twitter, Facebook and Linked In social networking applications. ConferenceConnect, ChirpE and similar solutions address multiple issues for event organizers. They make the face-to-face event more productive while offering organizers and sponsors an opportunity to interact more effectively and immediately with attendees. They also help to lower the costs of producing the event and reduce its carbon footprint.

The blending of live and virtual events will continue to emerge in the trade show industry. Recent enhancements in virtual event technology such as the Virtualis Convention and Learning Center on the Second Life platform and the Virtual U environment on the Active Worlds platform, take the virtual experience from two-dimensional to 3-D using avatars to simulate live people. Steve Parker, vice president and co-owner of Digitell, Inc., the developer of Virtual U, explains the value of the blending online and offline experiences. “Organizers want to give exhibitors a high return on investment. With attendance and exhibitor spending down, they are looking for other options and other models. Virtual worlds give them the opportunity to extend the exhibition to ninety days or three hundred sixty five days. Instead of a three day show, it becomes a year round marketplace,” says Parker.

The sluggish economy has forced many exhibition organizers to scrutinize their business processes more closely. What has always worked in the past may not be as effective in the present. The pressure is on to improve the value of face-to-face events while looking for ways to lower costs, increase productivity and usher in the next generation of customers. Event-specific social media applications will emerge as a “must have” feature of trade shows and conferences while mobile phone applications are the next logical access point for the tools and products made possible by the Internet. Hybrid events that offer participants virtual options will continue to proliferate. Over the next twelve months, event organizers will be looking more closely than ever at these and other emerging technology solutions to address their pains and secure the viability of their shows.

Meetings Industry Trends and Trend Setters

By Michelle Bruno, CEM

As the green movement and social media transition from trends to mainstream business practices, new trends are emerging. Companies that are vigilant are poised to reap the rewards from recognizing which trends represent opportunities and which are bellwethers of change.

Changing the structure of meetings

Several meetings industry practitioners have begun implementing new ideas for the structure and content of meetings. In his book, "Meeting Architecture—A Manifesto," author Maarten Vanneste defines meetings as "any physical or virtual gathering of ten or more people for at least one half day and therefore includes what is otherwise referred to as events, conferences, incentives, exhibitions, conventions, seminars, etc." Meeting Architecture, he writes, is "the task of designing the meeting experience, its content, format and context, in order to facilitate the desired reinforcement or change in participant behavior and thus provide greater value for stakeholders."

The Meeting Architecture concept advocates the use of "conceptual, human, artistic, technical and technological tools" such as open room layouts, actors, music, lighting, wikis, blogs, chats and virtual engagements to impact the learning and motivation of the attendee in a more profound way before, during and after the meeting.

According to Vanneste, some specific factors underlay the Meeting Architecture trend including:

- Meeting management shifting away from hospitality and logistics toward event content and format
- Corporate globalization driving meetings to play an increasingly important role in aligning different parts of organizations
- The millennial generation requiring a blend of real and virtual worlds for a more productive face-to-face experience
- Consumers taking control of dominant channels of communication through experiential and permission-based interactions

Vanneste's ideas are supported by a number of meetings industry professionals. Allyson Barth Shepherd, a Chicago-based trade show marketing professional and attendee promotion expert, frames the programs she develops for clients in terms of how her 26-year old brother would react or adapt to them. "Young people still want to gather for the trade show but when they gather in that place, they meet differently. They are used to choosing what information they want to receive and they are meeting not just to get information, but also to share information. The younger they are, the more they want to gather and do it on their terms."

"Unconference" is a term championed by Mary Boone, president of Boone Associates. It describes highly unstructured and interactive gatherings that require the participation of attendees to form the agenda, generate the content and document the outcomes. Open Space Technology, a concept developed by organizational theorist, Harrison Owen, is a form of unconference that employs four principles and one law as follows:

1. Whoever comes are the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time.
4. When it's over it's over.

The Law of Two Feet: "if at any time you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing – use your two feet and move to some place more to your liking," writes Owen.

In an Open Space format, attendees gather in one large room and are tasked with a particular problem or asked to suggest topics under a general framework for discussion. After the four principles and Law of Two Feet are explained, participants break into small groups based on the topics put forward. One person in each small group records the discussion and participants are free to roam from group to group at will. At the end of the meeting, the

discussion notes are combined and disseminated to the entire group.

Joan Eisenstodt, an industry consultant and educator, offers training on unconference and open space technology. "Meetings are over-programmed. Our conventional style doesn't allow people to use the wisdom that they have. [Open Space Technology] accommodates different learning styles, brings out ideas that were not planned for and offers people resources for solving problems," she says. Improved learning leads to higher attendee retention. "If we allow people to learn in a way that suits them, they will get more information, retain it longer, use it better and want to come back," she adds.

The trend toward meeting content and structure has been aided by recent events. According to Mitchell Beer, president and CEO of Ottawa-based, The Conference Publishers, "A focus on content is consistent with the industry's recent effort to distinguish the business of meetings from the image of a non-stop party that has been wrongly attached to conferences." Beer recognizes the opportunity presented by the recession. "We have focused more on coffee, the temperature of the meeting room, logistics, budget, and menu. Cutting the Danish in half used to be the most important thing. Now some planners focus on content, purpose and fulfillment. I think it is a gorgeous take away that the recession is forcing us to pay attention to what is happening in the session room," he says.

Outsourcing and Work Collaboratives

Industry layoffs are fueling a trend toward the outsourcing of some services. "Database building is no longer done in house and the 'do it yourself' mentality has diminished. Companies are looking at real business and their core competencies and seeing who can help them reach their goals," says Velvet Chainsaw's Dave Lutz, an industry consultant. Lutz has witnessed a rise in the number of freelance workers, business start-ups and even employees re-hired by their companies as consultants.

Driven partially by the economy, groups of independent contractors are forming work "collaboratives" under a shared brand identity to secure new business, share resources and spread workloads. Train2Meet is a consortium of top industry educators specializing in all major segments of the meetings industry. Each trainer works independently but also collaborates with other trainer members to develop programs that best benefit clients. Train2Meet was the brainchild of Eli Gorin, president of gMeetings, and includes other meetings industry veterans with expertise in meeting design, negotiation, risk management and entrepreneurship.

A group of independent event planners and service providers called 15:Zero 1 (after the "15 minutes of fame" quote by artist Andy Warhol) has formed a collaborative to offer marketing, logistics and technology to the exhibitions and events industry. Ann Marie Howle is a member of the group specializing in project management and event logistics. She explains that the group is more than a virtual company. For example, 15:Zero 1 has offices in San Francisco and offers profit sharing. Members of the group share a common philosophy to be "creative instead of competitive," says Howle. "[The 15:Zero 1 concept] offers customers the structure of an agency but creativity when it comes to pricing. It gives us the ability to offer different ideas, resources and options," she says.

The trends toward redesigning the content and structure of face-to-face gatherings, as well as the re-emergence of work collaboratives, are a reflection of economic pressure, rising fuel costs, globalization, and the preferences of a new generation of consumers. Large organizations, while cognizant of industry trends, may be hampered by their size or burdened by the need to preserve the integrity of traditional business models. Adaptation may be largely the province of independent thinkers, visionaries and entrepreneurs who have little choice but to reinvent themselves and their companies in order to meet the challenges of a changing industry.

Location, Location, Location
By Kenya McCullum

With 80 percent of all trade shows seeing a 10 to 20 percent drop in attendance, some show organizers are considering adding regional shows to their roster in order to decrease travel costs for attendees. Although this may seem like a logical solution to the declining number of attendees going to events, this is a decision that show managers should not take lightly—especially if it is a knee-jerk reaction to the economy.

“Regional shows are a good idea for some markets, but to think that there will be a fundamental shift taking place in trade shows from national to regional would be a mistake,” says Dennis Slater, president of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers.

Although regional events may not represent a sweeping change in the industry, there are some instances where adding additional shows does make sense. In addition to bringing a show to the attendees’ backyard, regional shows can be a good idea when an organization is trying to develop a market for an event. However, before show organizers take this leap, they should evaluate how adding a regional show will affect everyone involved in the event.

Attendees. A show’s audience may not be interested in attending multiple versions of a show, even if one of them does not require long-distance travel. In today’s market, attendees want to spend their time at the leading shows in their market and in order to convince them to go to additional events, an increased value that is too good to refuse must be presented.

Exhibitors. Although regional shows may be more convenient for attendees, they are not necessarily worth it for exhibitors. “Exhibitors are not going to want to exhibit in five or six regional shows when they can participate in one national show,” Slater said. “Just because a show is regional instead of national does not lower the costs associated with spending an extra two weeks at each of these events. They still have to pay for moving the freight and the time people spend out of the office to do a number of shows. This does not lend itself to reduced costs for them.”

Show organizers. Companies and organizations must evaluate if a new regional show is going to be beneficial to the overall event in the long term. Will it support the main event or dilute it? Will attendees, exhibitors, and sponsors see enough value in the regional addition to participate in it and the main show? If not, the effort may not be worth it.

If an organization determines that a regional show would indeed be a benefit, it is wise to proceed with caution. Show organizers can test the waters with regional seminars in order to gauge audience and exhibitor interest in the additional event.

Alternative Solutions to the Attendance Dilemma

Chris Brown, the Executive Vice President of Conventions and Business Operations at the National Association of Broadcaster’s (NAB), reports that the organization is currently exploring its options in response to a decline in attendance. For now, he says, the NAB’s audience finds it more cost-effective to go to fewer events rather than regional ones, but if the organization can create an added value with a new event, he would not completely rule it out.

“In the end, ultimately, you have got to be able to deliver a unique value and if you are not able to do that, and you have a weak regional event, you are not going to survive because attendees and exhibitors are making very hard choices in this environment,” he said. “Five new shows popping up generally is not going to be received that well because people are looking for efficiency.”

To make its events more efficient, the NAB has employed strategies that have actually increased the quality of attendees, despite the drop in number.

“People admitted and recognized that the numbers were a little lower, but we had a few exhibitors say that they actually got better leads, and in some cases even more leads because they had a little bit more time to spend with their customers,” said Brown.

Some of the strategies that the NAB used to attract those key attendees included:

- ***Taking advantage of the Internet.*** Although the NAB is not planning to create a full-blown virtual event, Brown says that the organization is considering holding Webinars and Webcasts that will help create a buzz for the main event and let people know what they missed at the show—and why they need to attend the next time. In addition, the organization is extending its reach through viral social media.
- ***Recognizing very important attendees.*** For the NAB's last show, it created a VIP program for its key attendees where the organization actually paid for their trip to the event. "Recognizing that in this environment what people were really struggling with was their budget, we said we would subsidize the trips of the top companies and top buyers in those companies," Brown said. "We offered them meetings packages so if they wanted to actually have meetings with their top management at the event, we would provide meeting space and some level of service at that meeting throughout the event."

Although the NAB funded this program by finding savings elsewhere in its budget, Brown says that giving attendees the VIP treatment was well worth the cost. Several attendees reported that they may not have been able to make it to the show otherwise and they were happy with the value the program added.

- ***Giving attendee tours.*** In order to ensure that exhibitors got to spend time with the attendees they wanted to meet with, the NAB created a floor tour for them. Although it was logistically challenging to get the attendees to all of the show's 1,500 exhibitors, everyone was pleased with the results.