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New Perspectives on Cultural Diversity and Inclusion

With the election of an African American President of the United States, the volume on discussions about cultural diversity and inclusion seems to have been turned up a notch. From the boardroom to the backroom, corporate executives and ordinary citizens are re-evaluating their approach to issues of race, culture, religion, gender and sexual orientation. Exhibition and event organizers are drawn into the discussion as they look to fill their attendee and exhibitor coffers with companies and visitors from other countries while attending to the increasing diversity of the population at home. Scholars and practitioners have pushed the diversity dialogue in the meetings and exhibitions industry beyond issues of accommodation toward a deeper understanding of the behaviors and dynamics of diverse groups.

Despite the expanding conversations about cultural diversity, there are some baseline practices that exhibition and event organizers should consider when working with a diverse audience. Best practices include making sure that event dates do not conflict with religious or cultural holidays, employing multi-lingual staff and ensuring that food and beverage choices appeal to the preferences of multicultural participants. Amy Beaulieu, MHA, who was a member of the Meeting Professionals International Multicultural Initiative Committee in the early 90s, also suggests applying cultural sensitivity to choosing show contractors (minority-owned businesses or those that employ multi-lingual employees, for example), developing show collateral and training staff. "Our country has always been a melting pot and it's going to continue to be that way. We need to address that fact and address it correctly," she says.

In her 2008 Business Week online article, "We the People: A Memo on Multiculturalism," Esther Novak underscores the need to implement strategies for reaching diverse customers. "Merely including images of diverse peoples or translating some marketing materials into another language does not constitute an effective approach to potential customers of diverse cultures," she writes. Using the Obama administration's challenge of selling the country on the stimulus package as an example, Novak suggests developing tailored messaging to each cultural, ethnic or demographic group supported by individuals that are responsible for identifying and assessing each group's needs, wants and priorities. Such tactics help organizations achieve greater brand loyalty and bottom-line benefits.

As the ideas and perspectives on cultural diversity and inclusion evolve, more business leaders are beginning to see diversity as a business issue with bottom-line impact. Citing the success of Marriott Hotels with disabled guests and Absolut Vodka with the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) community, author and diversity educator Patti Digh refers to the "intangible benefits that accrue to an organization that is out front about its openness to learn from its communities," as *reputation capital*. Culturally diverse exhibitors and attendees will support exhibitions that demonstrate an understanding of their unique needs. "Attendees have more clout now. They won't stay with companies that don't support them, and people will leave associations if they are not serviced," says Digh. The current economic situation adds to the gravity of the issue because attendees and exhibitors have more barriers to participation than ever before.

Diversity training for show staffers enhances their ability to provide services to clients. However, traditional programs that involve a "best practices" approach have limitations according to Digh. "The tips and hints are useful as a starting place but it's very abstract knowledge. If I don't find myself in that exact situation, the knowledge becomes limited," she says. She and her colleagues are building a body of work through The Circle Project that addresses cultural diversity from an experiential standpoint. By asking a "deeper" set of questions about why some cultures behave as they do, and how internal value systems drive others to interpret or evaluate those behaviors in a certain way, students learn not to confuse "noticing differences with making a judgment." The

training incorporates storytelling, metaphor, audience participation and other collaborative techniques to “co-create” a learning experience.

With increased globalization and the cultural fragmentation of target markets, it is more important than ever for exhibition and event organizers to develop strategies for appealing to multicultural groups. This approach, however, is not without its challenges. Two decades ago, an audience primarily consisting of African Americans, Asians and Hispanics defined cultural diversity. Today the dialogue on diversity and inclusion addresses issues of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, economic status, political affiliation and social identity. Amy Beaulieu asks, “Where do you draw the line with accommodations? If one group’s need conflicts with another group’s need, whose need is greater?” Putting aside issues of political correctness or the fear that non-compliance will prompt a public relations nightmare, cultural diversity and inclusion initiatives in the meetings and exhibitions industry will play an increasingly important role in building brands and generating profits into the next decade.

Lengthening the Life of Your Brand - Making an Impact During and After the Event **By Michelle Bruno, CEM**

Brands are built, not invented. Brands are the by-product of the many steps that companies take to create something valuable for their customers. However, if the perception of customers is that your brand only “lives” a couple of days per year, what can you do the other 362 days to keep the brand alive and continue to build value? Word of mouth (WOM) advertising is one of the keys along with traditional marketing mediums. With social media now among the viable options for building brand awareness, exhibition and event organizers have an array of tools at their disposal for lengthening the life of their brands.

A brand is “what the event promises to deliver,” says Paige Cardwell, president of CSG Creative based in Alexandria, Va. “A brand embodies what the exhibitor and attendee will experience and what they will take away from [the show]. It could be collaboration, technology or career advancement,” she says.

Impeccable execution of the event promise is critical according to Cardwell. The prime objective is making sure that customers leave talking positively about the show. This involves checking in with exhibitors, surveying participants, talking with speakers, monitoring conference sessions, making sure show managers are visible and making it easy for attendees to access information and resources.

Norwin Merens, managing director of Chicago-based NM Marketing Communications, employs consistency, innovation and the personal touch as brand building strategies during an event. Good communication and consistent follow-up to address customer requests is critical, he believes. Using electronic tools to help attendees navigate the show and keeping educational content relevant and fresh is also important. In addition, building a good brand requires what Merens refers to as the “feel good” stuff. “Make yourself accessible. Remember people’s names and address them by name. Know about the company and ask customers where they come from,” he advises.

What Cardwell and Merens both allude to is the importance of the customer experience. Lou Carbone, founder and chief experience officer at Experience Engineering, a consulting firm based in Minneapolis, Minn, believes that “engineering” customer expectations through emotional engagement, adds value to the brand. In a June, 2008 posting at the Knowledge@Emory blog, Carbone is quoted as saying, “It is all about understanding the psychology of the customers...It requires getting into the mind, heart and head of customers,’ and ultimately, discovering the clues that make them loyal, sometimes irrationally so, to a brand.” the blogger writes.

Converting satisfied customers into passionate evangelists is a year round activity. Jane Hawley, senior vice president, Client Strategy, at global event marketing agency in Sparks of Philadelphia, Pa, helps clients engage customers long after the event concludes. "We encourage clients not to think of the show as the beginning of a dialogue but as part of a year round communications strategy," she says. Some of the tools of long-term engagement that Sparks employs include micro-sites, Webinars, streaming videos and virtual tours. "Technology has allowed us to broaden the scope of what branding can be. There are millions of ways to reach out to people and get them involved," she explains.

Social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn assist event producers with building communities around the show brand. Web sites that offer electronic newsletters, white papers, blogs and other content keep the "buzz" going on social networks throughout the year and help build momentum for the next event. However, technology isn't always the answer, says Hawley. Regular marketing touches with a consistent message are more important than the specific tools being deployed. "The goal," she says, "is to become the consummate voice for that vertical." An integrated strategy utilizing a variety of marketing mediums is another option.

Few event brands have reached iconic status. Building a brand requires more than good customer service and a slavish attention to detail during the event, while stimulating word of mouth evangelism is a difficult and elusive enterprise. It is now more critical than ever to take ownership of the space a particular brand occupies by developing a strategy for brand enhancement that involves year round customer engagement. Failure to do so, invites competition from other events and other distractions that threaten to steal the attention of "loyal" customers.

5 Tools to Help Discover New Customers in a Down Economy

Creativity can help you grow even when the economy is shrinking.
By Pam Baker, Inside CRM

In an age where customers are as precious as rain drops in a drought, CRM is often hailed as the most essential business survival tool. But if CRM is indeed the best relief measure in this parched economy, why are customers still draining from companies' rolls as though the software were a sieve? "The definition of a recession from a marketer's view is when everything you've done in the past no longer works," said Michael Krigsman, CEO of Asuret Inc., a consultancy on IT failures. He also writes a blog on that topic for ZDNet. "It's not that the tools are bad, you just have to change the way you use them."

For starters, you have to twist the focus of CRM about 180 degrees, from the old internal management of customers toward a new deliberate customer-outreach strategy.

Drugstore.com Inc. is at the forefront of the CRM repositioning. The company recently repurposed its RightNow chat feature to serve as a product educational tool in its new customer-outreach program for its Beauty.com subsidiary. Essentially, highly trained agents recreate the brick-and-mortar beauty counter experience where cosmetologists address customer beauty problems and recommend appropriate products to solve them.

"We started that program just two months ago and we are already experiencing a 40 percent order conversion rate," beamed Lisa Larson, director of customer care at Drugstore.com. "We will do the plus-selling, up-selling measures at the 90-day mark — still a month away — but we already know it's going to be pretty darn good."

Larson said customers can even get the ever-popular "gifts per purchase" by major beauty product vendors exactly like they can at an actual beauty counter. She added that customers routinely ask agents to recommend enough products so the customer can meet the purchase minimum to qualify for the "free gift."

"We have even created our own kits to promote upselling and larger purchase orders," she said. "But the biggest factor is that our agents meet with vendors regularly and are highly knowledgeable of every product line we carry."

The metrics soared so fast that Drugstore.com plans to use RightNow chat similarly for Drugstore.com in the immediate future, followed by a new "white glove" personal shopper service the company intends to launch in about 60 days. "The white glove members will be our best customers and they will have special numbers and links for premier services and bonuses," explained Larson.

With that success story for inspiration, here are five tools from the experts to help you find new customers in a down economy:

1. Build a funnel to attract and feed new customers into your CRM. Marketing and customer service are now firmly fused. You cannot separate them and survive. There are a number of ways to funnel new customers into your company, but the first step is to make your company search-friendly. "A Web site that is not optimized for natural search is the equivalent of an unlisted telephone number," said Stephan Spencer, founder and president at Netconcepts.

"The algorithms used by search engines to determine query results are complicated and always changing. A Web site that was visible two years ago may have new barriers to that visibility now," he said. Either hire an SEO (search engine optimization) firm or revamp your Web site yourself regularly to keep up with SEO changes.

SEM (search engine marketing) is a strong alternative to SEO. SEM is simply the ads on search engine results one finds at the top and along the sides of the search results page. "You can spend a lot of money for a keyword, say like 'security,' and end up in front of people looking for padlocks when you provide body guards," explained Chris Selland, vice president of marketing and business development at EasyLobby Inc. and formerly an analyst for Yankee Group Research Inc. and Aberdeen Group. "With SEM you have a low-cost means to effectively target your prospects. Plus, they come to you if they click on the ad, so you have only qualified prospects coming in."

Matt Malden, CEO of Yield Software Inc. and former vice president and general manager at Siebel Systems Inc., agreed with Selland. "Advertisers can advertise with search engines like Google, Yahoo! and MSN so that their advertisements display on the top and right side of the page for users who are searching on relevant topics. That allows advertisers to address the billions of searches Internet users perform each month."

Selland said EasyLobby is investing greatly in both SEO and SEM as well as in constant contact to send email newsletters as a "soft-sell" reminder to current customers. "This doesn't sound like it has anything to do with CRM, but it does. You have to think of your funnel as an extension of CRM," he said.

2. Add and leverage social media to your CRM. It's not enough to establish your brand on a social media site like Twitter, Facebook or MySpace. You need to be able to regularly and personally interact with prospects on these sites and track them in your CRM program. Several CRM vendors already offer solutions to do this. "To manage Twitter conversations, we use BatchBook, our 'social' CRM that allows you to actually add a person or company's Twitter messages — called 'tweets' — right onto their contact record," said Michelle Riggen-Ransom, communications director at BatchBlue Software. "It's a great way to track what they are saying about your company, your competition or anything of importance."

3. Use the freebie tools freely. There are several CRM tools available that are worth considering as they may cut your costs in revitalizing and optimizing your CRM efforts. Take, for

example, Demandbase Stream, which integrates directly with Salesforce.com and LinkedIn. "Demandbase Stream can track and 'watch' specific customers or prospects and can be easily shared for intra- and inter-company viral adoption," said Chris Golec, Demandbase Inc.'s CEO. "It's a free browser-less Web ticker that captures and identifies contacts related to B2B Web traffic, effectively turning 98 percent of unrealized passive Web traffic into actionable leads." Golec added that over 500 companies have adopted the technology.

TweetDeck is another free tool that effectively manages Twitter for SMBs (small- to medium-sized businesses). Look around — there are new freebies popping up everyday and many can save you a bundle over CRM upgrades.

4. Repackage your offers to fit current customer needs. You might think this one is a no-brainer, yet it's the most often overlooked part of a revitalized CRM program. "Any effort to reach out, no matter how well-intentioned, will fail if the offer doesn't address customer need," warned Krigsman.

Case in point: LifeGem, a company that creates memorial diamonds from carbon collected from cremated remains, has tried everything over the last six years to increase its presence in funeral homes around the country. The current recession seemed to herald its demise. Instead, LifeGem looked for a way to repackage its product to fit financially embattled funeral home needs. "The cremation rate is on the rise due to the recession and funeral homes are looking at ways to offer meaningful permanent memorials to their cremation clients," explained Dean VandenBiesen, co-founder of LifeGem. "By presenting the LifeGem diamond as a real and permanent memorial item, we have signed on over 300 funeral homes in the last two months, compared to the 1,000 funeral homes we signed over the past six years."

The founders of LifeGem would never have guessed that an economic downturn of epic proportions would have had such a positive effect on their growth. With careful new attention to your customers' needs, you may be in for an equally pleasant surprise.

5. Leverage every CRM feature. Just as Drugstore.com leveraged RightNow's chat feature into a completely new customer-outreach program, other CRM features are ripe for exploitation. Certainly, you may need to add or upgrade your CRM in order to leverage the latest tools, but don't overlook the features you already have in the process. WrapMail Inc. offers a good example. "WrapMail is all about direct-marketing taking place among people that know each other by way of emails between them," explains Dave Kustin, CMO of WrapMail. "Each email is surrounded by an interactive letterhead that is linked back to a Web site, but more than just promoting a brand, a customer can click on any of the links in the Wrap and we then capture that data of who clicked on what and when."

WrapMail software is designed to make every employee a part of the marketing team by wrapping every outgoing email with their organization's marketing message. "We call this person-to-person marketing, which is the complete opposite of email blasts and newsletters," said Kustin. "There is nothing to install on any desktop and nothing to learn, everything takes place on the server level after the employee sends the email." Kustin added that WrapMail clients have the ability to "push" their products out in every email from every employee.

The bottom line: Comb the features of your CRM and talk with your vendor. There may be new ways to leverage what you have beyond anything you've dreamed.