

Getting the Most from Employee Events

When a big shift is needed within an organisation, face-to-face events have powers beyond other communication channels. But how can we ensure that these events – big or small - achieve real and lasting value every time given the differing audiences in typical businesses today?

At last week's Comma Partners event, some 30 senior level interim communication specialists gathered to share some of the latest thinking around employee events. The session was led by Jez Paxman and Steve Eakins, partners in [Live Union](#) which challenges how clients use events by defining where the real audience value lies and embracing new technologies, communication channels and formats. With clients like EDF Energy, AXA and Oracle for whom they have orchestrated events as diverse as intimate leadership summits and large scale all-employee experiences, they have developed a methodology that shifts audiences from attendees to active participants, delivering longer lasting business impact and higher levels of engagement.

"There was a time when people were predicting the demise of conference style events, with digital channels ending the need for audiences to come together in the same physical space, but in fact the reverse has happened. More people are getting away from their desks and attending events than ever before, but what they expect from an event has certainly changed," explained Paxman.

"It was refreshing and interesting to hear Live Union's stance on putting more emphasis on delivering a 'what an audience wants' agenda" Rachel Mackett, a long term interim currently with GDF Suez, told us. "I can see certain advantages in doing this, as it would make staff and associates 'feel big' from the perspective that they've have been consulted with and are effectively involved and part-responsible in driving ideas for content. This should, theoretically, drive the engagement factor in the event."

Putting the audience at the heart of the event is the key tenet of Live Union's methodology, and the cornerstone of this Comma networking event. Understanding who your audience are and finding out what they expect from an event is essential. In most businesses today, internal communications teams are finding ways to actively and successfully engage the long serving technical specialists, the younger upcoming GenY managers, the frontline workers and virtual colleagues, all of whom will have views on what is a good use of their time, and what they do and don't like around the event experience. And it probably isn't as simple as one size fits all.

Richard Davies, former Head of Employee Communications (eBay Europe) and now leading on employee engagement at Crossrail, shared his experience of delivering award-winning events: "Something that we learned very quickly at eBay, where we ran a weekly Europe wide video conference known as [European Team Brief](#), is that you have to think about the virtual audience as well as the people in the room where you are presenting. That means looking at the camera and providing opportunities to involve people at other sites and gain their feedback via audience response systems. Unless you do this, the 'remote' experience is simply that - remote. Like watching someone else's meeting."

It's about engagement



What the group did agree on was that involvement and collaboration are vital for a successful engagement outcome from an event. It is important to design an event experience with active participation in mind. Gone are the days – by and large - where an event is simply a series of departmental presentations with the dreaded PowerPoint slides – or being told the latest ‘big idea’ from the CEO. Many do still want a motivating and inspirational keynote from the top, but even more so, we want the opportunity to discuss those big ideas, build on them, stress test them and apply them to our own situation and our own business challenges. In today’s experience economy, we want to be involved.

Joanna Hyde, an experienced interim currently working with Tesco, added: “I started off my career in events and now focus on employee engagement and internal communication. One thing I always like to prioritise is asking the honest question, “What is our communication need and what do audiences really want?” - is it an event or something else? Whilst bringing people face to face generates emotive connection which in turn can be powerful at driving engagement and behavioural change, an event should always be just one part of a broader, ongoing communications strategy and not a one off activity. For me it is always essential to put the audience at the centre of any communication I’m planning, whether face to face or not. We live in a world of continuous information and messaging onslaught. So unless the message and delivery style is relevant for me, I will switch off. People want to feel part of a conversation and one that they have had a role in shaping.”

Thanks to the explosion in social media, many of us are confident about creating our own content or at least playing a part in shaping content. Being able to build event content around the suggestions of your audience is the first step in delivering greater participation at the event itself and from an internal communications perspective, it’s a gift.

Hyde again: “Co-development is key. I have seen Yammer (Yamjams) used successfully to enable content generation and specific content tailoring ahead of a major event.” And Rachel Mackett picks up this point: “As long as suggested content can be shown to align with company strategy, short-listed ideas can then be democratically voted for by employees and then distilled and designed to fit in with the event’s objectives.”

Technology

Having got comfortable with a more collaborative approach to determining the content, it’s the use of technology before, during and after the event that is proving really valuable in delivering longer term benefit to the organisation. Before an event – or a ‘corporate moment’ as some call them – making the most of existing internal channels and social networks has proven hugely successful at building a sense of involvement in and anticipation of the event. Conversations are started, conflicting points of view aired and shared, and the opportunity to better understand exactly what the workforce is thinking about and talking about is priceless to the communications team. The job of the event itself is then to explore these themes further and, through a more fluid format, allow people to connect with the issues that matter to them most.

Whether you opt for a BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) format with an app designed for the event’s purpose, or the use of audience response technology, preloaded with delegate data, session plans, interactive modules, voting tools, instant messaging, Q&A sessions and the like, the right



technology at your event enables each person to tailor their event experience, an approach favoured by Sara Hirsch who sees the use of technology as an invaluable aid, “ really helping communicators put the audience at the heart of everything we do. Whether it’s grabbing people’s interest, or facilitating quick responses, it tends to create a far less passive event experience than we were used to.”

Space

Used in conjunction with some more imaginative ‘zoning’ of space, good use of technology enables a well-orchestrated event to feel relaxed. More opportunities for one to one encounters (prebooked with the event app!), a variety of sessions you can choose to attend based on your areas of interest and plenty of time for less formal discussion between delegates. In the age of digital social networking, real world connections are increasingly valuable and valued and event spaces should be planned to make the most of these quasi-social encounters.

Post event

Communicating to the wider community after the event is so much richer if technologies have been embraced throughout the process. The conversations on internal social networks can continue, alongside the traditional ‘cascade’ mechanisms which remain important. But rather than banging out an email with the key learning points from the event and a copy of the slides, make sure it’s the start of a true conversation.

And Virginia Hicks of Comma Partners has the final word: “We have all worked on events in our careers and the tools and approaches have developed enormously. It is good to review a channel which can be under-rated and over-worked. Equally, it’s important to understand that the starting point is still the business objectives and any measurement should be driven by meeting those – but the impact is all about audience engagement. Interims can bring a fresh perspective to events as they can call on examples from different assignments where face to face has been particularly effective and fitted seamlessly into the communication mix.”

About Comma Partners

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com.

About Alison Boothby

Alison Boothby is a freelance business writer specialising in change, engagement and topical workplace issues.