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# 7 Keys to Improving Your 2009 User Conference

Planning your 2009 user conference? You're not alone.

If your conference is in the spring, the next couple of months will be critical for fine-tuning the conference strategy, aligning the event within the overall integrated marketing plan, and nailing down the agenda. We have an even tougher challenge this year because the tight economy will force companies to scale back their marketing budgets while maintaining high expectations for their user conferences. What is required is a "back to basics" approach that is focused squarely on customers and the problems they are trying to solve. These 7 keys will help you and your team stay focused on delivering the best user conference experience ever in 2009.

**1. Before setting a theme, clarify the objective.**

Themes are fun to pick because they can help to define tracks. However, marketers sometimes overlook the first step of clarifying the objective of the conference. What is the primary purpose for the conference? How will we measure success? As such, I've found that many user conferences do not have a clear objective. Instead, they have a hodge-podge of topics and tracks thrown together in a seemingly random order. While the conference floor may be bustling with activity, what did we really want to accomplish?

Some objectives worthy of consideration may include:

- To educate the customer base
- To create broad awareness for new products and services
- To collaborate or brainstorm with customers on new designs
- To foster customer-peer-networking opportunities
- To conduct customer research and gather critical feedback
- A combination of the above

Avoid the temptation to jump straight to themes. Clarify the objective first and you'll find that themes, the agenda, and the execution strategy will almost write themselves. Also, keep in mind that each of these objectives will require a different execution approach. And that approach can only be determined if the central objective is clearly defined and broadly understood.

**2. Create a "marketing blueprint"**

So, how do you get customers to your event? One Fortune 500 company sends one email per week to their entire customer database for the 10 weeks prior to the event, without any acknowledgement of who has registered and who hasn't. There is a fine line between "gentle reminders" and spam, and they clearly crossed that threshold.

Instead, take few minutes to create a "marketing blueprint" to guide your actions. A blueprint is a flow-chart that literally maps out a company's customer engagement dialog linking all marketing activities and offers together in a logical way – like a trail of breadcrumbs for the customer to follow. The best blueprints engage the customer in a meaningful dialog that unfolds over time. And it's more than just email. With some careful thought, we can architect a mini marketing program that makes use of email, website, Google adwords, social media, good old-fashioned direct mail, and yes, even the sales force. Proper use of these and other marketing tools, in the right order and with the right messaging, will help you bond with customers and improve your registration rates. *(For more on marketing blueprints including tips, techniques, and templates, please see, Marketing Campaign Development.)*

**3. Content is king!**

The reality is that the demands on our time are many. Regardless, this is a poor excuse for delivering the wrong content at your company's pinnacle customer event. It's easy to fall back on content that is readily at hand just to fill an open timeslot. First and foremost, the content must be relevant to the customer and aligned with the conference objective. With that in mind, here are a few tips for helping every speaker structure the best presentation.

- Start with an objective and an agenda slide
- Use slides to illustrate your points, not as a teleprompter
- Don't be a "talking head." Allow ample time for Q&A
- To boost credibility, use outside speakers (customers, industry experts) to lead key discussions
- Encourage unbiased customer feedback by partnering with professional facilitators who understand your business
- Use appropriate "ranking & voting" techniques to summarize and prioritize customer feedback and input
- Practice active listening techniques, always
- Tell customers what you'll do with the feedback you've collected and where they can go for more information

**4. Always follow-up with customers**

The #1 customer complaint is that they don't feel that they have been heard. Immediately following the event, send a "thank you for attending" email. This seems an obvious step, but 50% of companies I’ve worked with fail to do this. The best emails contain the following:

- Recognition of their participation at the event
- A short list of items discussed/learned during the event
- An invitation to “save the date” for next year’s event
- Where to go to get more information

Secondly, depending on the agenda and the intensity of the customer feedback, it may be appropriate to also provide a detailed executive summary. This detailed executive summary reflects key product feedback, feature ranking, and input regarding company priorities. It also describes (at a high level) next steps as to what the company will do with the feedback it collected. This is also an excellent step to keep the conversation going after the event has formally concluded. Executive summaries are ideally distributed 2-3 weeks post event.

**5. Share customer feedback internally as soon as possible**

The user conference doesn’t end when the doors close. Unfortunately, in today’s faced-paced economy we treat the user conference like a stand-alone event, and we’re happy, even relieved, when it’s over. Then we go off on to the next project. This is a mistake. Your company may have invested millions of dollars and countless hours to prepare for this important event. The feedback gathered needs to be shared throughout the company in order to help you confirm or re-evaluate your product plans. Document the learnings, insights, and results and present them throughout the company at employee meetings. Encourage everyone to add their perspective on an internal blog, shared directory (such as Microsoft Sharepoint) or wiki. Broadly share the feedback internally. It’s not a secret for a privileged few; it’s for everyone.

**6. Make it visible**

Making the results visible is not only the job of the event manager. It’s the job of everyone from the CEO down. Prior to the event, the executive sponsor should visibly promote the event during employee and cross-functional meetings. In addition to signifying the importance of this major company investment, they should reinforce the central objective and theme of the conference, including how it fits within the larger integrated marketing plan.

After the event, a celebration is in order. It’s easy to stop here, but don’t. Two post mortem meetings are required, with appropriate attendance. The first is focused on the event logistics and the preparation process. The second is designed to explore the product feedback and insight that will affect the product roadmap. These post mortems will become part of the conference’s official record.

**7. Participation requires commitment**

This last key is the most important, I think. Some product managers and marketers may feel entitled to own a module on the agenda, regardless of the conference objective or theme. And some event managers I know may feel at times that they can only get their job done if they ask product managers for favors. Both perspectives are likely when no expectations have been set regarding what it means to participate. Participation is a privilege, not a right. Establish a set of "rules of engagement" and set a timeline with clear expectations. For example, require all presenters to submit an abstract and an outline of their presentation *prior to* creating slides. This will help ensure all presentation topics are relevant and in support of the larger objective.

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*This article is written from a presentation entitled, "Taking Your User Conference to the Next Level" and is part of KickStart's WHAT'S WORKING best practices discussion series. For details on sharing this presentation with your team, please contact Mike Gospe at mikeg@kickstartall.com*