

GET 'EM ONLINE TO GET 'EM IN LINE: COMMUNICATING ACROSS GENERATIONS TO DRIVE EVENT PARTICIPATION

“Consider the state of meeting planning in 2009,” Marilyn Mobley advised her audience at HSMAI’s Affordable Meetings® National in Washington, D.C. in September. “Seventy percent of corporations have trimmed their travel budgets by 10 to 20 percent, and seven percent of meetings this year were cancelled. Meeting attendance is down five percent. Government planners say their meetings are down six percent.”

In the wake of this downturn, the use of technology and virtual meetings in place of the face-to-face experience is expected to increase. While it’s safe to say that meetings’ numbers should improve in 2010, “Seventy-six percent of corporations have said they will shift to some use of virtual meetings!” Mobley said.

Why virtual? According to surveys, Mobley said, 75 percent of respondents say they appreciate not having to travel; 64 percent like to attend on their own schedule, 58 percent wanted to forward a virtual event to colleagues, and 33 percent cited the social networking benefits of virtual events.

Concentrate on content if you’re doing webcasts, webinars, and virtual meetings. People want useful information, not



entertainment in these venues. They want demonstrated value that they can share with their organizations. “They want to learn about tactics and techniques that are immediately applicable, and they want to learn through a mix of content delivery methods,” said Mobley. “And they want links to sources so they

can learn more on their own.”

Now the question becomes, how do you drive people to onsite or online meetings? You have to use aggressive promotion geared to your audience’s interests and generation. You need to use multiple channels – email, social media, newsletters, and if you’re trying to attract the “matures,” the generation born before 1945, you’ll probably also need to give them something tangible to touch – a mailer, or at least something they can easily print from a website. And continue marketing – it is said that people today have to hear something seven times before it sinks in. Use all the social media resources: Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs. Generate exposure.

Mobley, a public relations professional and senior vice president and strategic counsel for Edelman, offered Edelman’s “five digital trends for 2009”:

1. The Baby Monitor Principle: PR Meets Customer Service - Meet demands instantly; address grievances, don’t ignore them, and this includes grievances appearing on all social media sites.
2. From print to digital – Understand the erosion of tangible media and the blending of news and information. PR today requires a holistic view of the media.
3. Friends are filters – Rely on your peers, and get “influencers” to talk about you and your meetings.
4. Find people who have good personal branding – and market to them. People listen to other people they trust.
5. Create great digital content that is relevant to your clients and customers.

To deal with the new communications paradigm of social media, you need to understand how it is used. Imagine a pyramid. At the lowest and widest level, there are the “watchers.” They’ll log on and look, but seldom contribute in any of the popular venues. The next level up are the “sharers,” who will write about their experiences sometimes, at least to friends. In the middle, you have the “commentators,” who are influencers. They contribute often and their comments are seen by their often large networks. Near the top are the “producers” – the blog writers who are widely read. This is perhaps 21 percent of the people who use social media. Then at the top are the “curators” who moderate forums, edit

wikis, spend a great deal of time on social media and have many, many followers. Clearly, these are the people you want to reach because their recommendations are widely seen.

Of every 100 people on a social media channel, statistics say that 20 are “dead;” 50 are “lazy” – they use it once a week or less; 5 have more than 100 followers, and 5 are “loudmouths” – the “influencers” who “tweet” often and have lots and lots of followers.

If your marketing includes blogging, be relevant. Provide valuable information, not just advertising. Make sure it’s something your audience will want to share with their friends. Be accessible when they comment, and treat them with respect. Involve them by doing polls, asking them to rank favorites. “Don’t tell them to ‘go to this.’ Give it to them, and give it to them the way they want it.”

HOW DO YOU DRIVE PEOPLE TO ONSITE OR ONLINE MEETINGS? YOU HAVE TO USE AGGRESSIVE PROMOTION GEARED TO YOUR AUDIENCE’S INTERESTS AND GENERATION.

What about the generational divide? Conventional wisdom leads one to believe that the younger the generation, the more time they spend on social networking. That might be generally true, but the largest group on Twitter now is 45-54 years old. The fastest growing group on Facebook is women 55 years or older. Mobley characterizes generational Internet use: “Baby Boomers use the Internet as a tool. Younger generations use it as a life style.”

Mobley offers the following useful definitions of generational traits to be aware of in your marketing:

“The Matures” – the generation born before the end of WW II, divided into the “GI Generation” (born 1936 or earlier) and the “Silent Generation” (born 1937-1945). They still want the written word in their hands – they read newspapers, magazines, books, traditional mailings.

“Boomers” – The Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. They want choices, and they like processes ... A+B=C. You don’t have to stroke them as much as the younger generations.

Typically, they will do a lot of research and will share information with others. This is the last generation that might read printed material, and they are the only generation that straddles that divide. They’ll read the newspaper and they’ll go online.

“Generation X” – Born between 1965 and 1981, they are irreverent, cynical, critical, independent,

funny, and they want what they want immediately. Don’t tell them that something will be available in a week or a month.

“Generation Y” – Born between 1982 and 2000, they are exceptionally bright and exceptionally demanding. They feel entitled, and they want everything instantly, right now, online, in full, and they will not look at printed material they get in the mail.

“Generation Z” – Born after 2000, they are approaching adolescence. We can only guess what it will be like to market to them when they reach adulthood.

Mobley, a Baby Boomer herself and, she says, the second oldest person in her office, advises, “Most of all, generations should learn from each other. You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”



Marilynn Mobley, Senior Vice President and Strategic Counsel for Edelman in Atlanta, GA., focuses on helping corporations harness emerging media to reach their audiences. Whether blogging, podcasting or webcasting, Marilynn designs programs that help companies form and deepen relevant relationships. Today Marilynn consults with clients who want to use emerging technologies to improve communications and increase the bottom line. Contact: marilynn.mobley@edelman.com.