

HOW TO UP THE CONFERENCE ANTE

Anyone worth their salt in the conference and exhibitions industry will tell you that the notion of added value comes standard in this game. This is the hygiene factor as opposed to a nice-to-have. Having said that, there is always room for growth and there are certainly ways for event organisers to up the ante. Craig Newman, CEO at the Johannesburg Expo Centre, believes that the role of data has fast become a crucial tool in any event organiser's arsenal.



If you really want to talk about a value proposition then start with your technology offering, says Newman. "As event organisers, we should be constantly looking, almost on the hunt for ways to improve our IT hardware and software offerings. As a starting point, we should interrogate whether our data collection approach is a solid one and offering real value to our customers" Newman is adamant that the collection of data and use there-after remains an untapped benefit for both exhibitors and delegates. "We have the opportunity to facilitate a yearlong dialogue with our stakeholders that extends far beyond a two day conference or exhibit. This type of sustained communication is what makes good business practice superior and its well within our remit."

More untapped opportunity lies in how we marry the conference and exhibitions industry with South Africa's emerging small business and plethora of dynamic entrepreneurs. Of course this is not as simple as it seems, given the level of

experience and service that has come to be expected by event organisers and goers, but we do need to address how we facilitate joint ventures down the line. "This is a necessary conversation to have as this type of collaboration is crucial for the economy and while it requires dialogue on the way forward so as not to detract from South Africa's burgeoning event industry, it is certainly possible."

To go back to the basics, when it comes to planning a conference or exhibition, nothing sets you up for success more than the research. If you want your event to be worth exhibitors' or delegates' time, leave them feeling inspired and keep them coming back; then mapping directly to

their agenda is essential. "It's easy to pay lip service to the research too, so interrogate your decisions." Whether it is securing a subject matter expert or deciding on meaningful giveaways, understanding the conference topic and the needs of your delegates is critical.

The truth is that we are already in this business to add value. We already plan exhibitions and conferences with painstaking detail and precision every day so as to offer target industries meaningful and unforgettable experiences. We need to evolve from being perceived as a value add industry to an indispensable partner in the South African business, leisure and entertainment landscape. 

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