

SPECIAL EVENTS

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Events That Don't Change Anything Are a Waste of Time and Money

To be effective, events should be more about the "why" than the "what," says expert Matthias Kindler.

Matthias Kindler | Aug 02, 2018

The following is an excerpt from Matthias Kindler's new book "Don't Catch Sharks with Hot Dogs," which offers insights that move special events from being fun and entertaining to strategic and effective. Here is how to order the book:

Asking "why an event is held" is probably the most important question of all. And that is because once you have asked this question, you are already in the middle of a rethinking process. With just one question, you will fundamentally change your approach to events. With this question you will switch the focus of your planning from an operative, logistical level--"What shall we do?" and "How shall we do it?"--to a strategic level--"Why are we doing this?" The positive effects this will have for you personally and for the reputation of your events will be revealed later.

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The "why" question is important for other reasons, too. It fundamentally shifts the focus of your planning. **And this because the answer makes the guests the center of your attention.**

Going by the traditional way of planning events, the host and his or her wishes and desires are usually the focal point. What the bosses want included dictates the character, dramaturgy and duration of events. The bosses' tastes and preferences determine the style and atmosphere--from the kind of location to the seating arrangement, the entertainment program, and the food and wine on offer.

We all know the excesses that can lead to. For one, there is the female celebrity one of the board managers has always wanted to meet. An event needs a

charismatic master of ceremonies, so it's the perfect opportunity to make her acquaintance--and at the company's expense, to boot. (And who knows what it might kick-start ...)

Another classic situation: the event is held at the boss's favorite restaurant--along with his favorite chef. What a wonderful location for an event! And if that really doesn't work, at least the chef could be put in charge of catering (even if him being a Michelin-starred chef means he usually only cooks for very small groups, and serving 200 people or more is a risk likely to end in disaster).

When cooperating with superiors, the greatest challenge is often the choice of show act. Since decision-makers are frequent guests, they get to see loads of live acts, cover bands and performance groups. The list of personal favorites is long, and even if the boss personally approves a booking, it is no guarantee that his mind will not change last-minute--and suddenly it has to be the "super-cool live act my wife and I saw yesterday at the Kwamondo event." Whatever the cost. There's just one small hitch: The act at Kwamondo was a metaphor for dynamics, and this event is supposed to be all about trust. Oh well. Just another of those idiosyncratic extravagances.

The approach described above is of course totally wrong and reflects the "lord of the manor" attitude often taken to events, along the lines of "I am paying for it, so I have to like it." You think this is exaggerated?

I hear it in my seminars all the time. Event managers tell me that they think more about their bosses' preferences than those of their guests.

Back to rethinking. I promised that the "why" question would move the guests to the center of your attention.

If you know why you are planning an event, then you know what you want to achieve. You know what the aim of your event is.

And this takes us to the crux of the matter. The aim of your event usually has something to do with change.

What do we mean by change? It's very simple: After the event, something should be different than before.

Something needs to change, specifically among the guests. What exactly could that be? Changes can occur in four areas. I distinguish between the target areas: Information, emotion, motivation and action.

Change in Information

Often, what is supposed to change is the guests' store of knowledge. If they are potential customers, this comprises their knowledge of a newly introduced product, its area of application, features, performance, availability, price.

Or if they are employees, this comprises their knowledge of the new corporate strategy. How will the company re-position itself for the future and what consequences will that have for their department and for them personally?

If they are the sales force, they will need to know about any new services. Who is the company aiming to address with them? Where might cannibalization effects arise? And how can you avoid them?

Where many events are concerned, especially formats such as conferences, congresses, workshops or product launches, conveying information is key if you want to make a change – a change in the attendees' knowledge.

Change in Emotion

Emotionalization is a much talked about (yet persistently woolly) aim of events, which is why it comes second here. Nevertheless, changing emotions can be a legitimate objective for an event. Changing guests' emotional state means

- From rejection to acceptance.
- From non-identification to pride.
- From a lone-warrior mentality to a sense of community.
- From “I don't care” to “I love it.”
- From “My head says no” to “My gut says yes.”

But how do you arouse the desired emotions? Probably not by hiring a so-called “emotional show act,” in which acrobats move emotionally to super-emotional tunes. At best, this is pretty, romantic and enchanting. But sometimes it can also be embarrassing. In which case, it also arouses an emotion but one, such as anger, fear or grief, that is not among the aims of your event.

Change in Motivation

A crucial effect that events can have is to change the attendees’ levels of motivation. Are the employees ready to go the extra mile for the newly restructured company? Can the guests imagine investing in the new product they are presented with? Will the sales team work toward reaching their targets with dedication?

A successful event can provide the crucial impetus to increase the guests’ willingness to act.

Change in Action

The fourth target area for change is the easiest to define and observe: attendees’ follow-on actions. These are clients who spontaneously place orders at the event, journalists who write about the product directly afterwards, participants who immediately register for the follow-up event, and so on.

These are clear signs that the event has made a difference. Before the event, guests were not active in the relevant field; after the event, they act concretely as the host intended.

The realization that events should make a change also makes a difference for you as an event planner. This means an automatic and irreversible difference. **Every kind of change, whether informative, emotional or motivating, shifts the focus of your event concept onto the guests. Because the change needs to occur with the guests, not the host.**

With this change of perspective, we have laid a solid base for defining the aims of an event. Automatically, in fact, just as I promised at the beginning of this article.

About good goals

There are many memory hooks, some more catchy than others. In 1981, George T. Doran, a “director for corporate planning,” came up with the phrase that good goals are “specific, measurable, accepted, realistic and time-bound.” **That’s smart.**

And it’s a good motto to have in the back of your mind when defining the objectives of your events. Remember that an anniversary party is not an objective--at least not a useful one. And that also applies to celebrating the “successful launch of the new vacuum cleaner DFG 2000”--because what exactly ensures its success? Likewise, marking the “positive start to the business year” is also questionable--because who decides what is positive? Even though objectives like these are still written in every other briefing, they are useless.

How do you define useful aims? And is it worth all the effort?

Formulating smart event objectives is not complicated and certainly not impossible. And Mr. Doran’s memory hook is both catchy and robust.

This can be illustrated by the example of a classic event such as the above-mentioned product launch. **Instead of describing your goal as a “successful product launch,” you just have to define what would mark its success.**

- If you are aiming for (positive) press reviews, you should invite journalists.
- If you are aiming to boost sales, the new product should be available for spontaneous purchase.
- If you are aiming for follow-up meetings, the purchasing process should be more complex.

To clarify this, let’s go through all the five letters in S.M.A.R.T.:

Specific: Specific means that every goal should be formulated clearly without any gray zones. “A successful product launch” is not unambiguous but leaves a lot of room for interpretation. When is an event like this successful? Surely every

individual participant will have their own perspective on that. But if your objective is to “boost orders from existing clients” and “secure meetings with prospective clients,” things are looking different. A strong objective is always formulated in as precise and specific terms as possible.

Measurable: Measurability comes next. Every strong objective needs a quantitative component. So let’s enhance the goals of “direct sales” and “scheduled meetings” with concrete figures. Now the target becomes “50 orders from existing clients” and “30 scheduled meetings with prospective clients.” Quantification allows you to track whether you have met your targets afterwards.

Accepted: The "A" stands for the broad acceptance that the event’s goals should enjoy among all those responsible. So, not only among those who define them but also among those who are tasked to achieve them. Ideally, the "A" also stands for attractiveness. Because what are goals worth if nobody wants to or can achieve them? In our example, the quantified targets must, then, be acceptable to top and sales management as well as to the sales team.

Realistic: The latter criterion goes hand in hand with realistic achievability. If the objectives are pitched too high, a frustrating failure is likely. On the other hand, objectives should always be ambitious and not expected to be achieved by default. At our example event, the targets for orders and follow-up meetings are shared between the sales colleagues in attendance. This means five orders and three meetings per sales-team member. Sounds reasonable, right?

Time-bound: And finally, consider the time frame within which the objectives will be measured. It could be marked out by the end of the event or a couple days later after the follow-ups. The exact point "when" is incidental--it arises from the context. The crucial thing is that everyone involved has agreed to the time frame beforehand.

Whether it’s a car or an objective, it should be smart.

So applied to our example event, S.M.A.R.T. would mean sales targets accepted by everyone involved, that can be realistically met in the event context. The number of sales talks conducted per sales-team member, pre-orders per client, follow-up

meetings scheduled to the end of the year, and so on. You see what I'm getting at ...

Of course, goals can also be about the image, awareness or perception of a company. **So, how do you deal with qualitative, i.e., soft, objectives?**
Easy: You assess the status quo prior to the event and compare it with the results afterwards.

For example, you could interview business partners prior to and after a road show to assess whether or not the event has changed their attitude toward the company.

Here's an example: Prior to the event, Company X is perceived as innovative by a mere 23 percent of respondents. After the event, the figure has risen to 45 percent. In this case, the event obviously had a positive effect--and the event manager did a good job.

And so we come full circle. As soon as objectives are S.M.A.R.T., they make changes. These happen with the guests, so they become the focus of the concept.

Automatically, in fact, just as I promised at the beginning of this article.

Matthias Kindler is a widely recognized leader in the art and science of special events and experience marketing in Germany and Switzerland. Matthias lectures and consults internationally. He is a highly awarded creative director and published author and has served on more than 20 communication juries all over the world. Today, Matthias works as a consultant and has trained and qualified more than 1,500 event professionals from 200 companies in his Masterclass Event and Marketing. His new book—"Don't Catch Sharks with Hot Dogs"—offers strategies to develop events that are not only entertaining but strategic. The book can be ordered [here](#).

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