

Schuler's Industrial Revolution

Despite product, location, and market challenges, Schuler AG redefines not only the transfer-press industry but also the business-to-business product launch, hosting a factory-based event that marries authenticity with high-tech theatrics to generate 200 percent more product-info requests than anticipated. *By Linda Armstrong*

When it comes to product-launch events, some marketers have it made. After all, given the chance, who wouldn't want to test drive the new Aston Martin Virage? And what gamer wouldn't die a thousand virtual deaths just to get his or her controllers on "Grand Theft Auto V"? Then there's the holy grail of products that launch themselves: anything starting with a lowercase "I." Given Apple Inc.'s army of brand loyalists and history of exceptional design and innovation, it need merely announce an upcoming product, and the preorders start rolling in.

But what if you're selling to businesses as opposed to consumers, and you don't have a legion of brand loyalists salivating for your newest release? What if instead of being alluring and agile, your product is as big as a bus and about as sexy as Steve Buscemi? And what if that product has a seven-figure price tag and a marathon-long buying cycle, and requires far more than a Genius Bar visit to comprehend?

These what-if scenarios, and then some, were the harsh reality for

PRODUCT LAUNCH

Company: Schuler AG

Event: TwinServo Technology Product Launch

Objectives: Debut an innovative transfer press, expand Schuler's customer base, generate post-event interest, and promote the company as a cutting-edge innovator.

Strategy: Devise a one-day product launch in Schuler's Erfurt, Germany, factory, to capture attendees' interest and help them appreciate its game-changing innovations.

Tactics: Pair the authentic factory environment with high-tech event technologies to create a unique experience for the audience. Incorporate delightful elements and a hands-on demonstration to craft an emotional event that mirrors the product's level of innovation.

Results: Garnered an unexpected 25 print and online media articles and local TV coverage. Exceeded post-event meeting and information requests by 200 percent, prompting Schuler to host three educational workshops to handle the onslaught.

Creative Agency: The Companies GmbH, www.thecompanies.de

Production Agencies: Atelier Weber Meiler GbR, www.atelier-wm.de; Georg Veit Lichtdesign, www.georgveit.com; The Companies GmbH, www.thecompanies.de; Visuarte, www.visuarte.com

Budget: \$339,350

Schuler AG, a maker of metal-forming machinery based in Goppingen, Germany. In September 2012, Schuler debuted its TwinServo Technology, which is built into its newly redesigned transfer press. Mostly used to mass manufacture metal components for the automotive industry, the 20-foot-long press stands 21 feet high and weighs several tons. Plus, Schuler's new complex machinery requires considerable education to operate, and at the time of its launch, the only press available for viewing was installed in Schuler's production facility in former East Germany.

As if Schuler's obstacles weren't daunting enough, the majority of its target market for the launch event comprised decision makers from the German automotive industry — i.e., uber-serious engineering types. And while this particular audience was usually attracted to new machinery like paparazzi to a "Bieber-behaving-badly" sighting, they weren't likely to pitch a tent in front of the factory just to be the first of their friends to own a new transfer press. Thus, before this audience would ante up for a piece

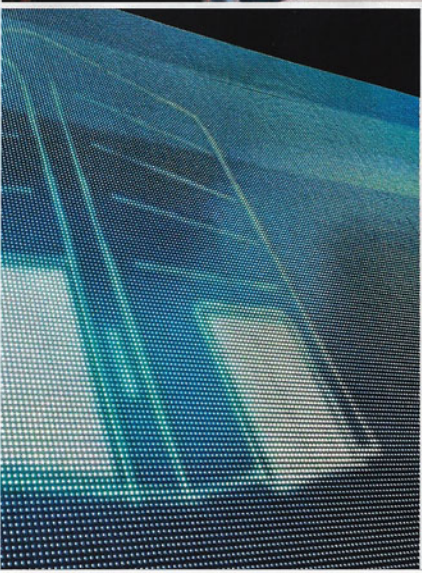
of machinery, Schuler needed to provide not only extensive product information and significant schmoozing, but also a launch event that would conjure a sort of gut-level reaction among attendees — one that would convince them that this new product was truly on the cutting edge.

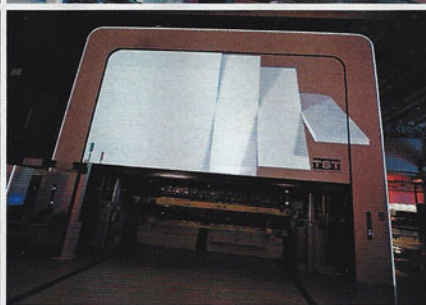
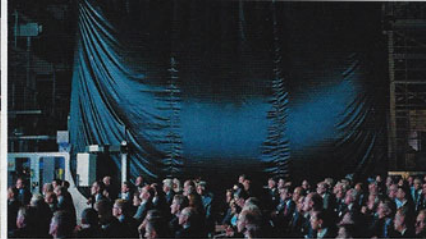
Clearly, then, with various product and market issues, Schuler didn't "have it made" like some product-launch professionals. But instead of caving under the pressure, Schuler — aided by its Munich-based event-design and -production agency The Companies GmbH — used these challenges to fuel its creative fires. The resulting event featured an awe-inspiring mix of high-tech components typical in consumer product launches along with low-tech elements this discerning B2B audience had come to expect — both of which were presented within the grease-and-grime-meets-metal-shavings world of Schuler's factory.

The unique combination surprised and delighted attendees, and also produced enough of that gut-level excitement to ignite a firestorm of follow-up meetings. What's more, Schuler's product launch won over Corporate Event Awards judges who presented it with the competition's top honor, the Judges' Choice Award, and hailed it as a "market-appropriate launch event that put the product center stage and then let it sing."

Industrial-Strength Challenges Schuler's strasse to success, however, was littered with more than just the aforementioned potholes. For in addition to the enormous size, remote location, and intense complexity of its TwinServo Technology, Schuler had several more goals for its product launch and its company as a whole.

Evolving from a locksmith company founded in 1839, Schuler has become





a global leader in metal-forming equipment and technology. In fact, in 2006, it launched ServoDirect Technology, also available in its transfer presses, which achieved significant financial success. So in 2012, Schuler was doing well financially, and was perceived as "solid" and "historic" in the market. But it hoped that in addition to increasing market share and bolstering sales, its product-launch event would help make the company appear radically innovative. Plus, its sights were set on market expansion, a goal made more difficult by its robust products' lengthy life spans.

"Schuler's presses are often used for several decades," says Matthias Kindler, managing director of The Companies. "People don't usually replace a press because it wears out; rather, they buy a new one if it offers some kind of innovation or efficiency that isn't available with the previous model — for example, maybe a new press can do more complex processes and costs less to run. And even if customers buy a new press, they'll likely keep the old one to perform less-complex maneuvers."

When customers make this sizeable, long-term investment, then, it also usually means either squeezing this enormous piece of machinery into an existing factory, or creating a new structure or even adding a whole new building addition to house it. So to find prospective customers or to tempt existing customers to buy a new press, Schuler's product had to be drastically different than everything on the market and needed to address customers' size-related concerns.

Enter Schuler's transfer press with TwinServo Technology. The product offered innovative metal-forming advances that Schuler felt would excite potential customers, allowing them

to craft complex shapes via efficient, one-off technology. In fact, Schuler was sure that these advancements were game changers for the industry — offering never-before-seen benefits and capabilities.

Plus, the new press offered efficiencies of size that could help Schuler expand its customer base. Up until this point, Schuler's equipment sat on a factory floor where it took up considerable space. The new press, however, is significantly smaller; plus, it's actually built into the foundation of a building so that 17 feet of its assemblage — comprising mostly what one might call its "engine" or "drive" — sits below ground. So customers with relatively small production facilities, and those that otherwise couldn't afford to build new warehouse space to house a new transfer press, can perceivably buy Schuler's product.

The press, however, also offered improved working conditions. With the original press, noise from the whirring, clanging machinery made for a tremendously loud working environment. But the new press is almost fully enclosed in a rather stylish white box. Bearing the blue Schuler logo, the contemporary enclosure adds a high-tech feel to the machinery, but it also provides a noise buffer, making the press quieter than almost anything else on the market. So by the summer of 2012, Schuler had a game-changing product that would surely make waves. Now it only needed a launch event equally as innovative to do the new press justice.

"Our clients and prospects are very much used to VIP invitations, and their schedules are extremely busy," says Andreas Trost, Schuler's head of marketing. "Our objective therefore was to stage an event to remember, but also one that communicated a sizable amount of information about

Schuler's innovation." But when you're talking about a sale of this magnitude — and a host of lofty objectives — merely relaying product information isn't enough.

"We knew we needed a unique event that would not only show the product in action but also offer attendees an experience unlike anything they had seen before," Kindler says. "So the launch had to get key customers excited about the press and include the same level of innovation inherent in the product. And to create an emotional connection we felt would seal the deal, we wanted to somehow surprise

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people with the experience. That way, they would not only buy the product themselves, but also spread the word of Schuler's innovations to the rest of the industry."

A Welcome Change

Schuler's product-launch event was scheduled for Sept. 27, 2012, in the company's Erfurt factory, roughly 110 miles southeast of Hannover, Germany. Measuring approximately 8,500 square feet, the factory acted as an authentic backdrop for the event, creating an interesting old-meets-new dichotomy to further emphasize the innovative press. Plus, since the new machine was installed in this building exactly as it would be in a customer facility, hosting the event in Erfurt meant people could experience just how much difference the "below

ground" design made in terms of the footprint required, noise control, and operator ease of use.

Roughly six weeks before the launch, then, Schuler's salespeople hand delivered a personalized invitation letter from Schuler's board of directors to 450 managers and decision makers in the automotive industry. While the invite process was certainly old-school B2B, it was highly personal and actually carried an air of mystery, as it revealed very little about the new press and merely teased prospects about its revolutionary innovations.

Drawn by the mysterious invite and their own desire to stay on top of new developments in the industry, 300 attendees — spot on with Schuler's goal — made their way to Erfurt on Sept. 27. Since most guests were from Germany and/or neighboring countries within a few hours' drive, they simply drove themselves to the city, where Schuler had provided lodging at various hotels. Starting at approximately 3:30 p.m., Schuler-arranged shuttles began transporting guests from the hotels to the factory.

Arriving at the facility, however, wasn't a hoopla- and fanfare-filled event, at least not initially. "We wanted attendees to experience a delightful surprise when they entered the first of the three zones of the event, so we purposefully kept the exterior and even the check-in area rather bland to create a stark contrast," Kindler says.

Attendees stepped through an enormous loading-dock door and into an inconspicuous check-in area comprising little more than a few 8-foot-long tables and a handful of check-in personnel distributing name badges. Surrounded by floor-to-ceiling metal shelving filled

with various automotive parts, boxes, and bins and standing on a concrete factory floor, which had merely been cleaned and painted for the event, attendees assumed they were in for yet another ho-hum product presentation — minus the classy ballroom, plush carpet, and fancy hors d'oeuvres.

As attendees made their way further into the space, however, their environment — and their assumptions — began to change. While steel shelves, wooden pallets, and metal parts and supplies formed the perimeter of the welcome zone (the first of three event zones), a 35-by-12-foot LED screen positioned at the far end of the space projected soft blue light and the words “Willkommen im Unformcenter Erfurt.” In a glance, the environment gave attendees a hint that this might not be the same kind of low-tech, low-interest product-launch event to which they were accustomed.

Within the welcome area, an 820-square-foot space bathed in a yellow glow courtesy of overhead fixtures, attendees discovered a series of ingenious, waist-high tables. The white wood-and-laminate structures each took the shape of a different letter, the combination of which spelled out “Schuler.” “The tables were a cool design element but also a way for salespeople to easily connect with specific attendees,” Kindler says. “When salespeople talked to their clients and prospects prior to the event, they instructed them to ‘Meet me at the U’ or ‘Find me at the E.’ It was a great way for them to quickly connect amid a crowd of more than 300.”

Attendees enjoyed an open bar and passed hors d'oeuvres in the welcome area for approximately 45 minutes, but nary a hint of what came next was revealed to them until the giant LED screen began to move. Large white arrows pointing to the

right of the welcome zone appeared on the screen as a hidden mechanical support slowly slid it back 15 feet. As the screen glided into position, a walkway leading from the front right corner of the welcome space into a second, then unknown, zone off to the right was revealed. With their drink-wielding customers and prospects in tow, salespeople led their quizzical entourage to the next stage of the event in the auditorium zone.

Revelations of Divine Innovation

After maneuvering the relatively dark, tunnel-like passage, attendees emerged in a somewhat mysterious space featuring a wash of diffused

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white light. Here, attendees were no doubt perplexed to discover the press Schuler launched back in 2006 dimly lit on their left — as opposed to Schuler’s new press. In reality, the new press, which filled the right side of the space, was shrouded in darkness and concealed behind an enormous black curtain, making it almost disappear from view.

As attendees slowly took in their surroundings, they caught sight of an elevated stage on the far end of the room, which featured another 35-by-12-foot LED screen displaying the words “Forming the Future” in white atop a Schuler-blue background. In front of the stage, attendees found another break in form from traditional product launches, i.e., hundreds of

white Schuler-branded cardboard boxes that took the place of conventional auditorium seating. Judges hailed the use of the “boxed seating” as both a wonderful way to further brand the space and as “a great way to add a bit of whimsy to an otherwise industrial environment.” (Kindler notes that the cardboard boxes were actually sturdy creations comprising highly durable material typically used to ship metal parts. “Don’t worry,” he says. “They could hold up to 300 pounds each.”)

Once the energized attendees got their bearings inside the space, salespeople and staff soon encouraged them to take a seat on one of the boxes. “You could literally see the sense of wonder and excitement on people’s faces, and everybody was nervously chattering with each other about what would come next,” Kindler says. “No, this might not seem incredibly innovative to typical event planners, but the unique environment, unexpected boxes, and uncertainty about what was to come was a peculiar yet welcome experience for this particular audience.”

After everyone settled themselves on the boxes, a female emcee took the stage and introduced the speakers. Following a welcome by Schuler’s CEO, the Minister of Commerce from the state of Thuringia, where Erfurt is located, spoke about the history of Schuler and its importance to the economy in eastern Germany. Finally, Schuler’s chief marketing officer and chief technology officer revealed some of the key advancements of the new product, giving attendees their first verbal glimpse of what Schuler was about to unveil.

With the presentations completed, the emcee took the mic once more and said simply: “Please turn 90 degrees to your right and witness the

technology of the future." And with that, the overhead lights went out, the curtain concealing the new press was pulled back in a "whoosh" via a hidden overhead assembly, and the outline of the press became visible.

Attendees quickly repositioned themselves to better observe the developing spectacle on the right, as speakers boomed "Protectors of the Earth" by Two Steps from Hell (an emotionally intense orchestral score well suited to the "Breaking Dawn" climax when the Cullen and Volturi covens finally lock fangs). Meanwhile, a two-minute projection-mapping sequence, courtesy of Munich-based Visuarte, featured bright white lights that traced the seemingly stark-black press. Then, white bands and blocks began to appear and disappear, and then flip, undulate, and transform, creating a mesmerizing piece of high-tech wizardry the likes of which this audience had never seen.

"The mapping sequence seemed to outline the press, and the undulations indicated that the new machine was trying to break through its outer casing," Kindler says. "Projection mapping isn't new to marketers and event producers, but it's absolutely cutting edge to this audience."

As the vibrant music and mapping sequence reached a crescendo, both elements suddenly switched off, and overhead spots blasted the new press in bright white light. Practically stunned into immobility, attendees ogled the press as the emcee and Schuler's chief technology officer stepped in front of the mighty machine and invited them to approach the new press and witness the future in metal-forming technology.

And witness they did. Kindler estimates that attendees spent an average of 15 minutes talking with salespeople and engineers and





thoroughly inspecting the machinery before operators finally started it up and began cranking out a series of automotive engine parts. Able to be heard over the relatively quiet machinery, salespeople pointed out key benefits, such as the in-ground “engine,” smaller size, process innovations, etc. Then, after roughly 35 minutes of demo time, salespeople and staff began directing attendees back down the passage from whence they’d come and into a newly revealed hospitality zone.

Eat and Run (to the Demo Area)

Emerging into the third and final zone, attendees discovered that the LED screen from the welcome zone had been pushed back into its original location but rotated 180 degrees. Providing ambient lighting for the upcoming dinner service, the screen continued to project the “Forming the Future” tagline as attendees made their way further into the space.

While the metal shelving and typical factory trappings hadn’t been removed from the hospitality area, Atelier Werber Meiler GbR, which provided temporary architecture for the event, assembled a fabric-architecture system that hid them from direct view. Ingeniously illuminated by lighting-design and production firm Georg Veit Lichtdesign, the opaque fabric concealed factory elements, but the lighting provided shadows of those same elements. Thus, instead of looking at metal stairs, steel shelving, and cardboard boxes during dinner, attendees saw the shadows of these elements deftly projected onto the surrounding white fabric.

Housing 40 white tables and 200 chairs, the dining area featured Schuler-blue carpet and an ethereal blue and pink glow courtesy of the LED screen and various gel-equipped floodlights suspended overhead.

Guided once again by their sales reps, attendees eventually made their way to the appropriate assigned tables, where they enjoyed an elegant three-course feast.

As dinner wound down, attendees were delighted to see an elevated bar literally roll into the dining area. "Schuler's factory has a wonderful rail system installed in the floor that allows a rolling lorry to transport heavy materials from one area to another," Kindler says. "We positioned a bar atop the lorry and rolled it into the space to signal the end of dinner."

Attendees, however, didn't quite take the hint — or rather, they didn't take the action that Schuler and The Companies anticipated. Instead of grabbing a drink and heading for the shuttles waiting to take them to their hotels, most attendees made their way back to the new press. "After spending literally hours at the event, attendees still went back for more," Kindler says. "They wandered down the passage to the press and dragged engineers and salespeople with them to learn more about the machinery. We expected people to be at their hotels by around 10:30 p.m., but we finally had to kick them out of the factory at 1:30 in the morning so crews could start cleaning up and prepping the factory for work the next day."

For Schuler, this extended interest in the product and attendees' significant time commitment — a total of almost nine hours — was proof that the event had succeeded on all fronts. "The amount of on-the-spot product interest was a clear sign that the event was a success in terms of creating an emotional reaction among attendees, and a good indicator that we'd crafted a cutting-edge experience that went beyond what most of these people expected," Kindler says. "With Schuler's 12- to 18-month buying

cycle, we will have to wait for months or years to see the sales rolling in, but we knew this was a success when people refused to leave."

Success Under Pressure

Evidence of the event's effectiveness didn't stop there. While media coverage wasn't among Schuler's priorities, the company certainly welcomed the bevy of unexpected coverage that ensued, which included more than 25 print and online articles as well as a short piece on local TV.

The journalists, however, weren't the only ones spreading news of the

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product launch; event attendees joined in the chatter. Schuler quickly released a new-product announcement that captured the attention of automotive manufacturers across the globe, but those 300 event attendees also spread the word to their plants around the world, and talked it up to engineers, operators, executives, and purchasing departments within their own facilities. In fact, they told those folks that they needed to get themselves back over to Erfurt ASAP so they, too, could understand the importance of the new technology.

Within a couple of weeks after the event, Schuler was so inundated with information requests that it decided to host a series of informational workshops to handle the onslaught en masse as opposed to query by query. While Schuler originally hoped to set 30 post-event appointments, it ended up scheduling three workshops with 30 attendees apiece — beating its appointment goal by an astounding 200 percent.

So despite the size, price, and buying cycle for the new press, not to mention the company's staid B2B audience and out-of-the-way launch location, Schuler created an award-winning and media-generating launch event. And if post-event interest is any determinant of future sales, Schuler's product might not change merely the way things are done in the industry but also the future of the company itself.

What's more, Kindler believes experiences like these could pave the way to changing the B2B event industry as a whole. "We're really proud of what this team has done," he says. "We've taken tactics that are almost expected in the computer and electronics industries and applied them in an authentic and emotional way to a B2B arena. This proves that you can tastefully apply some consumer-products staging and presentation techniques to this marketplace successfully and economically."

Given the enormous pressure it was under and the countless hurdles in its way, Schuler certainly didn't "have it made." But it managed to harness that pressure and marry authenticity with theatrics, ultimately cranking out one diamond of a launch event that was an award winner to boot. **E**

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