

The Value of Registration – Does your process hold water?

A Point of View from BPA Worldwide

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In the 1980s Ford Motor Company introduced the slogan “Quality is Job 1.” They wanted to make a point about the value to consumers of the workmanship put into their cars. Commercials showed automobiles being constructed by tireless workers in spotless factories to prove the point that quality was the main ingredient in every car made and the first priority of everyone working for the company.

In the exhibition industry, we constantly hear the motto “Quality over Quantity,” especially during lean years like the ones recently experienced on a global scale. When the quantity of attendance goes down, so organizers say, the quality of the attendees/visitors goes up. If this is true, where does the measure of quality attendance start and how can organizers ensure this really is the case?

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Claiming quality attendance starts with gathering accurate data through a controlled and verifiable registration process. A show organizer’s data, as the Chinese say, is their “treasure.” However, some organizers choose to treat their “treasure” like buccaneers of old, burying it for later use and sometimes forgetting where they put it. The quantitative (attendance) and qualitative (demographic) data gathered through pre-show and on-site registration provide the real value to revenue-generating clients (exhibitors and sponsors), depending on their strategic reason(s) for investing in the show. Most often, this qualitative data is never shared with the stakeholders in a meaningful way.

Now consider the effect that poor data gathering can have on the internal strategic objectives of the organizers themselves. Many organizers don’t realize their registration process is porous and allows stakeholder demographic and contact data important to the marketing process to be lost. They then wonder why it continues to be difficult to meet strategic growth and marketing objectives on all fronts.

Now let’s add to the question of how an organizer proves the value of their show to stakeholders with how the organizer ensures they are gathering quality data for growth strategies and marketing initiatives and what other benefits might be derived from accurate data gathering.

A tradeshow audit is an independent, third-party validation and analysis by a certified auditing organization of an organizer’s verified show attendance and demographic data gathered during the registration process (pre- and at-show). This process can effectively show organizers where the holes in their system are occurring, will allow their exhibitors and sponsors to have accurate and credible data with which to validate their investment with upper management and, as a result, allow for a shorter sales cycle for organizer sales teams.

In the US and around the world, most show organizers have said if exhibitors start asking for audited data, they will provide it, but not until then. In the US specifically, organizers are very slow to adopt the industry best-practice of auditing because they fear what exhibitors will say if the attendance numbers are lower than claimed. Exhibitors want the demographics. They don’t care how many bodies are in the exhibition hall as long as the bodies are the buyers they want to see. Qualitative verified show data provides this.

Other forces are also at work. UFI, The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, stipulates that show organizers applying for new membership must have at least one event audited as part of their membership requirement. The show must be audited two consecutive sessions before the organizer can effectively apply for membership. UFI is recognized as a global exhibition association and their long-standing UFI Approved Event logo marks an exhibition as an event with international buying clout (based on UFI standards). The rule for current members is they must keep their audited show data updated by providing UFI with recent audit certificates over specific time frames dependent upon the shows' frequency. The UFI audit requirement most frequently occurs in the regions of Asia/Pacific, China, Europe and the Middle East.

However, exhibit marketers have a tough time finding enough third-party audited data to make an accurate and informed investment decision about show participation since auditing is not practiced regularly worldwide. Organizers are also not able to comfortably understand the quality control check the audit provides for their data-gathering process (registration) since many of them are not using this global industry best-practice.

A show organizer must have two items in place for an audit to be successfully and objectively accomplished: 1) an effective electronic registration process for gathering contact and demographic data and 2) an effective verification method for proving that visitors and others attending the show actually came and didn't just register for the show.

Their pre-show process gathers contact and demographic data electronically through online registration via their websites. The online process usually requires that all questions be answered or it will not allow the registrant to advance through the process. For on-site registration, a number of organizers (mostly non-US) still use hard-copy manual input forms which do not have mandatory fields that control the process. The registrant is left to fill in as much or as little information as they like. Some organizers require a business card to be attached so manual key-in can be done later or after the show.

If preparing to have an audit for an event, a show organizer must be aware that call-backs will be made to a representative sample of the verified attendees. The call-backs (which can be accomplished by phone or email – never regular mail to save time) are completed to the sample to prove with a high-degree of certainty that the data is indeed accurate. Poorly input data resulting in missing or inaccurate information—especially contact data—can result in “non-contactable” records.

Now imagine the internal ramifications for an organizer wanting to market to these same database records. They may be able to clean up and find some of the lost data, but the potential for reduced marketing ability is high. The database becomes difficult to monetize for other revenue opportunities as well. Organizers take such care to develop their marketing message, their mailings and email blasts and their marketing collateral, but at times seem to think little of ensuring the database to which they are marketing is accurate and complete.

The use of the auditing process and report as a sales tool, as investment validation and as membership requirement to an organization like UFI, is important to consider. Equally important, the audit process is a strong internal quality control check to ensure that data is being gathered timely, accurately and completely, which works to the benefit of organizers and exhibitors alike.