

BPA WORLDWIDE CASE STUDY:
Unexpected Benefits of the Event Audit Process
American Thoracic Society International Conference



We help the world breathe
PULMONARY • CRITICAL CARE • SLEEP

OVERVIEW

The American Thoracic Society provides its exhibitors and event sponsors with an independent, third-party audit report of its verified attendance and demographic data. The ATS is auditing its data to ensure accuracy and transparency to their participating stakeholders. The decision to audit was prompted by the ATS Exhibitor Advisory Committee, a group of event stakeholders made up of exhibitors, sponsors and association members who help set show strategy and provide guidance to the organizers from the client perspective.

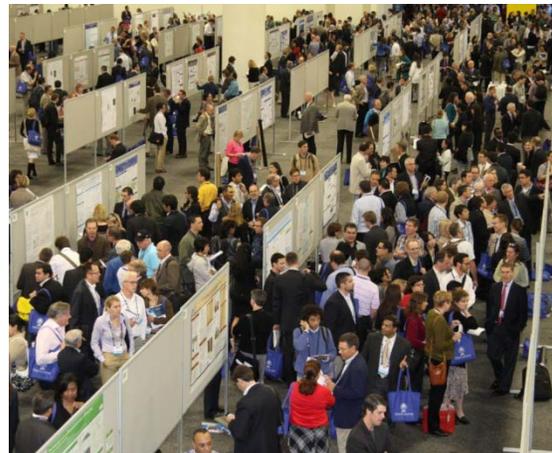
NEED

During the 2009 American Thoracic Society Exhibitor Advisory Committee meeting, members of the committee specifically asked for audited attendee data before the next show cycle. Stacy Blackshaw, Associate Director, Corporate Relations & Exhibition Operations, states that because of a tougher economic environment, tighter marketing budget questions were being asked of the exhibit managers. Exhibit managers were being asked to justify their exhibition marketing spend much more closely than in previous years. Questions like, "Who is really at the ATS meeting?" and "Is our target market at the event?" were being asked by upper management decision-makers. Blackshaw also mentions exhibit managers were pointing out that demographic data provided by the ATS did not align with their perceptions.

There were also factors fanning the audit flames for the ATS show management. The recession certainly tops the list since it was fueling the exhibitor investment justification conversation and, on the show management side, was creating a road block for investment from new prospects. The recession also began to influence merger decisions between long-standing clients who may have had individual booths. This left Blackshaw as the main ATS booth/sponsorship revenue driver, scrambling to fill booth space left open because of disappearing (merged, non-returning, etc.) companies. Because the ATS has a number of pharmaceutical-type exhibitors, product life-cycle, patent expiration and even poor test results influence their ability or interest in exhibiting. Therefore, proving the value of the event to this sector is extremely important. Competitively, ATS is one of three associations organizing events in the pulmonary/critical care/sleep space. How would Blackshaw differentiate her event from the others?

BACKGROUND

Historically, tradeshow organizers have provided little in the form of transparent and accurate information about their exhibition attendance and demographics. Numbers related to the business demographics of the audience attending an event come mostly in the form of ambiguous percentages and survey research data. Many organizers base event attendance not on who actually attended, but on who registered to attend. In some cases, depending on the show and industry, a variance of as much as 40-50% can be seen between the number of verified attendees actually at the show compared to those who only registered, but did not attend. This occurs most often with events that provide free attendance to the exhibit floor by way of VIP tickets and exhibitor invitations.



Event audits have been provided in the US since the late 1980s and early 1990s. The idea of having a third party organization that is skilled in survey research or auditing that reviews and verifies data was—and currently is—viewed with a sense of fear, apprehension and misunderstanding.

This fear factor comes from organizers' understanding that independently audited attendance and demographics from proven, verified data will not match up well with past figures derived from the pure registration information.

A recent emphasis placed on return-on-investment (ROI) through measurement of different metrics taken from activities performed by sales teams at shows has reinvigorated an interest in methods to provide more accurate data to exhibition stakeholders. One method is using the audit to verify registration data post-show.

Emphasis within the tradeshow industry is also being placed on transparency of information; exhibitors asking organizers for information on hotel rate formulas; information about material handling rates for move-in and move-out from an exhibition hall; information about badge encoding; and increased transparency for understanding the makeup of the attending audience.

Because every industry has its own set of issues, solutions are often provided in a one-off manner based on the specific challenge at hand. The healthcare industry ranks high in transparency and ROI challenges related to increasing government regulations on pharmaceuticals, doctors and corporate marketers' relationships to these groups, etc. Being a key player in this aspect of the industry, the ATS began to feel pressure to provide more transparent data from an increasingly vocal stakeholder base.

IMPLEMENTATION

After meeting with its Exhibitor Advisory Committee, the ATS show management held internal meetings to discuss the priority of providing exhibitors with audited show attendance and demographics. They immediately saw the benefit that more detailed event data could provide compared to what only percentages could show. Asking questions like, "How many attendees in a target market make up 40% of the attendance?" resonated to this point. They then asked, "If we are exhibitors looking for our marketing niche, how do we know what our possible sales lead universe is? Percentages don't give us that answer." The team also examined how they could position the audit data for international-centric clients and how the report could positively affect marketing to this segment since basic percentages also did not get to the heart of this situation.

Asking questions like, "How many attendees in a target market make up 40% of the attendance?" resonated to this point. "If we are exhibitors looking for our marketing niche, how do we know what our possible sales lead universe is? Percentages don't give us that answer."

American Thoracic Society
Exhibitor Advisory Committee



The decision was made to move forward with an audit of the event data and become the first medical association to be fully transparent with show information. The logic was simple—healthcare brand marketers would have the opportunity to make an informed investment decision for participation based on accurate, third-party validated attendance and demographics.

Once the decision was made, the ATS created a press release that went to their media distribution list. At the same time, BPA, with approval of the ATS, wrote a press release that went out to a different distribution list to ensure full trade media coverage.

Next, the ATS used the BPA press release onsite at the show in their sales office so exhibitors picking space for the next event would be fully aware audited data would be available for their budgetary decision-making process.

“For us to put our credibility and reputation on the line by going forward with a public review of our event data, our stakeholders realize more than ever how strong our commitment is to them and to the future growth of this event...”

Stacy Blackshaw, CEM
Associate Director, Corporate
Relations & Exhibition Operations

Since BPA would be at the show for onsite observations of the registration and verification process, BPA’s events audit manager was invited to participate in the onsite Exhibitor Advisory Committee meeting to provide an overview of the audit process and field any questions the committee might have. Several weeks after the show, the database was sent to BPA for testing and analysis and approximately four to six weeks later, BPA provided the ATS with a final report that was posted to both organizations’ websites for public review. BPA capped off the audit project with an hour-long training for the ATS marketing/sales team on how to read the report and prove the value of its event to new and renewing stakeholders.

BENEFITS/RESULTS

After the report was delivered, Blackshaw used the audit report as an interim prospectus for speaking to renewing clients, new prospects and other event stakeholders. She also took the audit report to competitive events where she could use it as a valuable sales tool to show exhibiting clients/prospects what they could expect to see at the ATS International Conference in terms of specific demographics should they decide to renew or exhibit for the first time.

This tactic met with excellent results as several prospects committed to ATS participation for the following year right

on the spot. Besides being a powerful sales tool, Blackshaw cites the relationship growth and “trust factor” with her clients has never been stronger. “For us to put our credibility and reputation on the line by going forward with a public review of our event data, our stakeholders realize more than ever how strong our commitment is to them and to the future growth of this event,” Blackshaw states.

Michelle Turenne, ATS Senior Director, Corporate Alliances & Development, adds, “The audited data in our BPA report goes well beyond the booth space. Knowing who attends the ATS conference through our audit report allows Product Managers, Marketing Managers and Medical Affairs to work creatively with us to further reach their target audience before, during and after the conference.” This is being realized through programs like Advertising, Grants, Satellite Symposia, Clinical Trial Awareness, KOL meetings and Focus Groups. “We had no idea the report would be so far-reaching and affect so many aspects of our overall conference,” Turenne concludes.

The ATS has audited its International Conference for the last three years and continues to do so.



For more information on this audit and on BPA’s Events Audit services, visit the BPA Worldwide website at www.bpaww.com/ or call +1.203.447.2800.