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CROWD SOURCING

Could the Next
BIG IDEA
Come From
Your **Customers?**

What if you had the ability to invite all of the people who had previously attended your festival to your office for coffee and a brainstorming session? Imagine what it would be like to pick their brains. To learn what they like, or perhaps more importantly, what they dislike about your event. What if they could each jot down an idea or two for improvement and you could take those collective suggestions for evaluation and possible implementation? That would be seriously cool, right?

The very definition of marketing has always been assessing customer desires, needs and expectations followed by delivering a product, including the way you choose to promote it, that delivers on what the customer wants. For decades, marketers and their cohorts in the advertising and public relations fields have grappled to find effective and affordable methods to learn what the customer wanted.

Solution: enter the world of social media and its ability to engage in intimate, one-on-one communication with our customers. A professional colleague recently told me, "This whole social media thing scares me. What if people say something bad about my festival? Why would I want to give them the opportunity?" While I perfectly understood her misgivings, I told her that for as long as humans could speak, they have been saying bad things about experiences that made them unhappy. The problem was, they could do the damage without us ever knowing the nature of their dissatisfaction and without any ability to address the complaint or win back their business. In many respects, social media presents us with an incredible opportunity to listen to the stream of customer conversation, if we are so willing, and do something with what we hear.

From the ability to listen and interact came the next great idea – involving the customer in planning! From actual product innovation to feedback on promotional tactics, customers can now have a virtual seat at the table through crowdsourcing.

What is crowdsourcing? Wikipedia defines it as "A distributed problem-solving and production model. Problems are broadcast to an unknown group of solvers in the form of an open call for solutions. Users—also known as the crowd—typically form into online communities, and the crowd submits solutions."

One of the most cited corporate success stories in using crowdsourcing is Dell Computers. Through social media monitoring, Dell realized they had a problem. A rather serious problem. Customers hated Dell's delivery of customer service and, by extension, were starting to hate Dell. With this epiphany, Dell launched an initiative to listen to the customer experience, take their ideas and make a serious commitment to improving customer service. And it worked.

Dell deftly embraced the worldwide intelligentsia of its customers and harnessed this newfound base of free consultants to launch IdeaStorm, a new website that seeks customer ideas and opinions on, well – everything! As of early April 2010, IdeaStorm has generated 13,799 ideas, 410 of which have been implemented by Dell. This is not the only nationally-recognized organization to become seriously engaged in this concept. Boeing, Nike, P&G, Starbucks, NASA, Netflix and IBM are just a handful of corporate heavy hitters who've launch similar initiatives.

The premise is frighteningly simple. How much better could our events be if we simply asked what our customers want? And now, the technology makes it easier to implement. But before we start asking the customer, it makes sense to first ask ourselves what it is we wish to know. Blowing the doors open and incenting customers to take a run at anything is exciting, but we should set some internal parameters on what is feasible, in terms of time and human capital, within our respective organizations.

Are you interested in adding a brand new element to an existing festival? What would it be like to allow that process to be entirely led by the very group of people for whom it is intended?

Do you wish to launch a new overall initiative to your event, such as making a concerted effort to "green" your festival? Imagine the ideas that could be offered and the opportunity to have customers help identify priorities.

And what about refining existing processes at an event? How many times, as an event planner, have you attended another event or entertainment venue, only to spend much of your time playing "arm-chair quarterback" on all the ways things could have been done better? It could be experience that makes us quickly think of these ideas – or maybe merely a set of fresh eyes. Chances are our customers could offer countless ways to improve the festival's current operations by looking at the event as an objective observer.

The success of crowdsourcing will likely relate to several factors. How passionate are your customers about your festival? Have you already built an online community? Are you willing to invest the time it will take to feed and manage the process?

STEPS:

Build your social media presence.

Developing a social media presence is step one before crowdsourcing can be successful. Chances are, if a customer cares enough to become a fan of the festival's Facebook page, follow the festival on Twitter or subscribe to its blog, that same customer will welcome the opportunity to share his/her ideas.

Establish an idea depot. Decide a location(s) for customers to deposit their ideas. All the ways that you invite feedback should point to a central point or two, such as a website landing page or social media site.

Offer incentives. Customers are often willing to offer their insights for free, but who doesn't like recognition for their ideas? With inexpensive online tools, such as www.wildfireapp.com, festivals can add a contest or sweepstakes promotion to their Facebook page for as little as \$5. The prize for winning may be serious "bragging rights" coupled with VIP treatment at the upcoming festival. Other organizations have chosen to offer a cash prize. Regardless of the incentive, be sure that your fine print states that all ideas become the sole property of the festival without obligation for remuneration to the person(s) who submit ideas.

Gather and analyze what you learn.

While the point of the exercise is to harvest an abundance of great ideas; these ideas must be sorted and vetted to determine their usefulness to the festival. Remember, Dell has implemented less than three percent of the ideas gathered by IdeaStorm, but those ideas are credited as both great innovation and cost-savings for the company.

Lather, rinse, repeat. The real strength of crowdsourcing is not using it as a one-time endeavor. The very thing that makes this process so provocative is its ability to let us have personal, two-way conversation with our customers and stakeholders. Continuing the process, over and over, allows us to build trust, refine conversation and reap even more dynamic feedback.

When I was a kid, one of my father's favorite sayings was, "Never be part of a problem unless you are willing to be part of the solution." His words seemed to be sage advice at the time, but little did I know how relevant they would become in a career that has revolved around marketing and management. This is our chance to take our customers with us on a great journey to improve and innovate the next big moment of greatness for our festival. Isn't it time to make them part of the solution?

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