## Starting a Formal Conversation About Research in the Festival and Events Industry

Really, any data can be a big deal to professionals in the festival and event industry, and this column is dedicated to exploring the use of research and data in festival and event management.



Welcome to the first of a regular column in "ie" focused on thinking more thoughtfully about how our industry (and we) use, misuse, or never use data to support our event decision making. Never has data been more talked about, and been more accessible. However, in my thirty years in the industry both as a practicing professional and higher education faculty member, I've found research/data to still be a challenge for most festivals and events. Therefore, the time is right to have a regular conversation about "Big Data...Big Deal", as data is a big deal.

It is difficult to avoid the topic in the media today; and it seems we have many words that are used to describe the topic whether in simple terms related to gathering information, data, or research to popular terms including business analytics, intelligence, knowledge management, or big data. Today we are surrounded by people talking about it, however, few understand the unique challenges festival and event professionals face related to understanding, gathering, and using it. Our industry is not often talked about it popular media; and our needs are unique when compared to larger, more corporate, and less seasonal organizations.

I have three specific objectives for writing this column, and my hope is you have interest in together accomplishing the following:

- 1. Increase the use of valid and reliable data in festival and event management,
- 2. Expand the research methods utilized by the festival and event industry, and
- 3. Share valued existing (secondary) research to get festival and event professionals thinking!

For over five years, I have formally surveyed industry professionals regarding their research practices. What I do know from these findings, and my years working with the industry, is we are all over the place in terms of our research practices. However, we agree on its value, and its future importance. In the professional festival and event industry, our research use ranges from very little to incredibly sophisticated. This column focuses on those festival and event professionals in the middle; the majority who seek more insight on the topic, conduct some formal research now, and want to learn to do and use more.

A recent sample of 50 festival, event, and hospitality organizations indicated only a few conducted "little research", and only a few conducted "a great amount of research". Most described themselves as organizations that believed research was important, and they conducted only some formal research. It was considered by over two-thirds to be valuable/very valuable, and near all indicated they should "conduct more research in our organization".

When and if they conducted research, respondents most often evaluated financial data, and they asked attendees/participants/visitors what they thought about the festival/event experience. Far fewer gathered formal insight from other stakeholders (e.g. volunteers/employees, vendors, sponsors, board members). And, even less utilized data from analytics from marketing sources (e.g. website, social media accounts), conducted competitive insight, understood consumer

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demographics, or utilized the abundance of secondary research that is available.

In the past twenty years, we have gone from a handful of research journals in our industry to hundreds at our fingertips. Data is beyond available and accessible, it is quite overwhelming. Never has there been a more important time to strategically evaluate how we gather, engage, and use data to provide insight for our festivals and events. There is no better and more important time to learn to integrate research practices into our regular operation. It will become the way we do business, and the way we make more informed, more educated, and more effective decisions.

What these data highlighted about our industry is, although we value it and want more; there are many barriers to doing so. And, I'm certain, not at all surprising to you, time is by far the most frequent reason listed. However, I'd say to you, is it time? Or, is it not a priority?... as time will always be a barrier to any business action. My hope is by addressing these barriers, gathering and utilizing research will be more of a priority and it will benefit your festival/event.

Other noted barriers often listed in why limited data gathering/use include money, access, and knowledge on how to find and gather it. In this column we will look at techniques or thoughts on how to reduce these barriers. I would be naïve to think anything I talk about in this column would be of value to you until we do so. And, I have to address these issues in order to fulfill the column's objectives (remember, I want to get you thinking, and using it more often to help you make more enlightened decisions).

If these 50 organizations are like you and my first thoughts have you thinking about your own attitude regarding research, and your festival or event's research practices, my hope is a column dedicated to this topic will help you to find ways to be more strategic in your research practices. In every publication, 1.000 words will be dedicated to it.

Tell me what you think about the new column, and what interests you have while exploring this topic together. In the meantime, I can't wait to start a conversation in the next "ie" publication about understanding the expectations of our stakeholders. We can improve knowing more than just

how satisfied they are...let's find what is important to them and prioritize decisions based on their insight.

Patty Janes loves how accurate data helps organizations improve. She is a faculty member and industry professional at Grand Valley State University's, Hospitality and Tourism Management department. For over 25 years, her teaching, research and consulting specialties include marketing, research, and training in the festival/events, and hospitality industry. In 2015, she completed research projects for several festivals in Michigan including the National Cherry Festival. She also spearheads a non-profit event organization bringing tourism industry professionals together to volunteer and help restore historic tourism attractions, build a stronger tourism community, and market tourism destinations (www. michigancaresfortourism.com). Connect with Patty at janesp@gvsu.edu, and/or (989) 424-0123.