

Turnstiles: Marketing for Event Managers

By Sean King



WHEN SPONSORS GO *Rogue*

While hosting presentations on marketing and sponsorship over the past few years, one phrase that usually elicits a chuckle is “when sponsors go rogue.”

I’m not certain whether this response is due to the outlandish consideration that sponsors could actually go rogue, or that it strikes a chord with what the audience may have read in the daily headlines. Either way, it is clear people always enjoy hearing more of the stories of when things haven’t necessarily gone according to plan.

There are many circumstances that lead up to a crisis situation at the hands of your partners. Perhaps it is business practices and leadership, or is a situation in which your partner has said or done something awkward or less than elegant? Yet both circumstances have the potential to negatively affect your organization or event.

How you approach these situations is fraught with anxiety on everyone’s behalf, and can destine the partnership for success or failure based on the steps you take to navigate through the pitfalls and steer through the headwinds.

No one begins with a goal to create a negative situation. However, for those of us on the front lines, we are left to deal not only with our partner but also our board, leadership, staff and volunteers and ultimately our customers and guests. At some point, all of our stakeholders will be – or feel they will be – impacted, but it is the shining moments of doing right by both our partner and stakeholders that will be remembered.

To this end, we’ve been talking about

theoretical challenges to our partnerships, but what are some of the issues that do come up and what are some possible resolutions to those situations?

National News

The type of crisis that arises because of a national partner doing something that enters the zeitgeist is more common than you think. However, this is the time when you may be able to shine the brightest on behalf of your partners and stakeholders. For national entities, any topic from your partner’s business dealings to mergers to the loss of jobs can make its way onto the front pages and newsfeeds of your followers and potentially impact you in a negative way.

The first step when addressing this type of concern is to the commitment that your organization is still intact. While big stories tend to get a lot of buzz in the media and especially social media, internally most large organizations already have a well thought out plan to deal with the negative publicity surrounding the news. It is important for you to work with their official messaging, understand it and ask if there is a way you can assist. More times than not, large organizations prefer to not have third parties speak on their behalf, but your support and engagement can speak volumes to your partner given the details of the particular situation you are dealing with.

Now is the time for you to be playing the role of supporter and friend. Ask your team, what short-term benefits can your organization leverage to get through the first days and weeks of the crisis in order to calm the waters?

In the few cases where we've experienced this sort of dilemma first hand, it was clear that we were working with true professionals who were as committed to us as we were to them. Every step of the way, we took on the role as extended employees and family members to get through the situation at hand. We could not have been treated better by our partners, and realizing they were in a position not of their own doing, we felt a sense of pride and dedication in assisting them through what certainly was less than ideal circumstances.

Local News

While dealing with a national partner that could show up on the evening news and splashed across all of the morning shows, and worse yet on the late night comedy shows, what might be even more impactful is when a local business makes the news in a negative way.

These are your personal friends and neighbors. Their kids go to school with your kids and when they make the front page of the hometown news, or have posts spread on Facebook, it is right-down-the-street real.

How you approach this situation will have real consequences in the short and long term, and how deftly you manage the crisis will determine your standing for a long time to come, so it is best to not be too glib.

Of course, the severity of the news that breaks on your partner is the first item to address. If it is illegal, unforgivable or immoral, you have no option but to cut ties and hope your organization is not connected too deeply in any way to the crisis.

However, the line gets blurred quickly if there are two sides to the story and only the most negative side is gaining attention. Public relations 101 tells us to be cautious and not to react too quickly to a situation, but in these days of immediate connection directly to members of your community through social media, it will take a little time to determine the public voice for your organization and how it reacts to your partner.

If you have the time and resources, it might be best to think through how you would deal with such a situation in advance so that you can react quickly once the details of the situation are established. How would you address the news? Who would be the spokesperson? Where would you post? Answers to these questions in advance would make the job easier should the unfortunate occur.

Transparency is the key and being up front and as forthcoming as soon as possible is usually the best course of action.

Messaging

Imagine if your closest partner came out with an advertising or publicity campaign that went directly against your organization's mission or views. What would you do?

Again, as there are almost always two sides to the story, it is imperative to get to the bottom of their strategy immediately. Who made the decision? Did they know what impact it might cause? Is there any way to change the course of the messaging? Once you are able to determine the basic facts of the situation, it is much easier to decide on what direction to take moving forward.

In one case we had to work through, it was clear that the action was awkward at best and that our partners would retract and correct immediately after an avalanche of negative comments on social media.

Step two to our plan was to make sure that our stakeholders were kept aware of each step of the process and over-communication was the policy until the news cycle ebbed and we were able to go back to the real business at hand.

Keeping everyone in the loop and allowing for your partner to understand which boundaries were crossed is critical. Providing context to the issue and discussing the resulting negative impact, were clear objectives of our crisis management policy. In the end, both the relationships with the stakeholders and partner were strengthened because of the connections and communication made due to an unfortunate choice of words.

Volunteers

Sometimes our wounds are self-inflicted. Given the negative issues that come up from time to time, it's possible that a volunteer can do damage to our partnerships without even knowing it. Case in point, we had a partner struggling with negative press and for some reason a volunteer felt it important to reference this news at an event. Needless to say, the sponsor was already hyper-sensitive to the situation and the last thing they expected to hear at an event they were sponsoring was negative comments from an event volunteer.

The takeaway from this experience is to always be in communication with all levels of the organization and to take nothing for granted. If a partner is struggling with a negative situation, make sure everyone on your team is aware and is knowledgeable as to the organization's policy on the situation.

As one of the partner's representatives said, "We are happy to sit and talk for hours about the situation and to answer any questions they might have, but to be approached in such a way that it was impossible to address, we were starting from a defensive posture from the get go."

Cringe-worthy is the only word that comes to mind.

In Summary

The long-term commitment you show to your partners will help to define their role within your community. We cannot say it enough: there are only so many ways for brands and companies to connect in meaningful ways throughout the communities that define America.

Whether it is part of the brand's strategy to use your festival, event or fair to connect to the community or if it is just good business, in times of crisis or when a company is flying high, the event space is a place to connect in meaningful, authentic and relevant ways to sell more widgets, improve employee morale or just be a good neighbor.

Keep up the good work and hopefully you'll be able to avoid any rogue

Sean King is a Principle at Aspire Consulting Group in Allentown, PA and has been consulting with small businesses and non-profit organizations for over 20 years. He also blogs regularly at www.artsmarketingblog.org. You can follow Sean on Twitter @skingaspire or contact him at: sking.aspire@gmail.com