
B@ND AFFAIR

Turning **Customer Encounters** into Long-term **Relationships**

It's more than advertising, marketing or a catchy slogan. A powerful brand identity can help build an audience and lead you beyond the numbers to where the real value of your event is found: visitor and exhibitor trust.

BY JOEL SCETTLER

Well-known brands are everywhere; they surround us. Google, Apple, Starbucks, Coca-Cola. The names are immediately recognizable, conjuring up images of both the products they represent and the attitudes and identity they define in those of us who use them.

These days, everything is built on the power of a brand, even cities: think Las Vegas, “What happens here, stays here.” Brands not only set the product apart in the marketplace, they also feed the bottom line by turning first encounters into lasting relationships.

For event planners trying to attract the crowds to the expo floors and conference rooms, a brand can be a powerful tool. The long-term goals are not to simply reach the customer once; promotions and price can do that. It’s the second and third visits that matter.

It costs seven to 10 times more to recruit a new customer than to keep an existing one, according to data gathered by Brand Keys, a New York-based brand consulting firm.

The firm’s research shows that an increase in customer loyalty of only 5 percent can lift lifetime profits per customer by as much as 95 percent.

Any event planner wants attendees to become repeat customers and have confidence in their event, said David Korse, president of the Boston, Mass.-based IDG World Expo, the producers of international tradeshows such as MacWorld and LinuxWorld. Whether promoting a consumer product from Procter & Gamble or a business service from IBM, said Korse, the branding principles are the same.

“We are trying to build a better profit-making brand for a series of events,” Korse said. “And the greater the brand recognition, the better client retention and loyalty, the more referral participants we get, the more effective we are and the more successful we can be.”

If customers come at all to your event it’s because they’ve been promised they will receive something of value for their time. If they reach into their wallets again, it will be because you’ve lived up to your end of the bargain. Without the brand relationship, it’s just carbonated sugar water in a bottle.

The Whole Story

So what is a brand? It’s more than what you might think, said Karen Post, a branding consultant and author of *Brain Tattoos: Creating Unique Brands That Stick in Your Customers’ Minds*. “Let’s straighten all of the myths for all of the people who think the brand is simply a logo, or the tagline,” she said. “That’s absolutely not the brand; that is one tiny morsel of the brand.”

Think about the food you choose at the grocery store. You may have five choices of the same product, but one manufacturer’s brand will stand apart from the crowd, said Post, because “you know what it’s about, and you have a clear idea of its point of distinction.” That mental connection with a particular product, or “brain tattoo” as Post calls it, is built on expectations and past experience with the brand. It’s

what often convinces customers to remain loyal and pay a premium price. For the customer, the process is the same whether they are choosing a brand of spaghetti sauce or which event to attend.

“The brand is really what somebody thinks when they see one of your advertisements about your upcoming meeting or event,” said Post. “It’s what they feel when they receive your collateral material in the mail, and it’s what they expect when they pick your event over some other event that they could spend money and time with. That’s really what a brand is; it’s the sum of what an entity does. It’s how they behave. It’s how they communicate. It’s how they respond to challenge. It is everything that they do that makes up the brand.”

A brand works best when it sets the bar for a customer’s expectations, writes Janelle Barlow in her book *Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge*. Creating a brand is a way to coordinate all of your activities to present a strong promise to the public about what your event will offer, Barlow said. Fulfilling this promise by delivering on those expectations cements the relationship with customers while defining the brand.

In her book, Barlow cites an Australian bank that, in 2002, worked to measure the impact of its advertising campaign. They soon discovered that customers who were both exposed to the bank’s advertisements and experienced its customer service had developed the strongest associations with the brand’s attributes. “A combination of strong advertising to let customers know what they should expect and then consistently delivering the advertised service results in the most positive brand associations,” said Barlow. “Even though brands speak to large population groups, customers experience them as personal connections to products and services.”

For meeting planners, the tools for establishing expectations and creating a strong event brand include such things as public relations, Web and direct marketing, advertising, e-mail announcements — and even the choice of speakers scheduled on the program. Everything a meeting planner does can be organized with the goal of creating a branded experience.

“There is a tremendous amount of power in the idea of brand,” said Barlow. “Once you start looking through that lens you begin to see things that you never saw before; you begin to pay attention to things you didn’t pay attention to before. When they are done well, brands are very tightly controlled and they tell a story. And that story is enhanced and created in every opportunity it can. These are some fantastic lessons for people who run events.”

Such brand stories can heighten the customer’s relationship with your event. For example, Barlow suggests thinking about popular product brand taglines such as Nike’s “Just Do It,” or Southwest’s brand line “You are free to move about the country,” which suggests a free spirit, knocking down the barriers that travel is only the purview of the rich. It tells “the truth about

an organization — if not today's truth, then a truth that is aspired to," said Barlow.

Dave Greer is hoping the new event brand he has created pulls directly at his customers' hearts. In April, Greer's company, the Wayzata-based Porchlight Productions, will launch its first Lake Home & Cabin Shows in Milwaukee and Minneapolis. "If you ask a Minnesotan if they have had a cabin or lake home experience, nine out of 10

do — when they were a kid going to the family cabin or something like that. They really have a warm feeling about that," Greer said. "This is really powerful when [your brand] can go after that."

For the past eight years, Greer helped produce boat shows and expos in the Twin Cities, but this year he is setting out on his own. Following research on the demographics of vacation homes and seasonal property owners

David Korse on Building an Event Brand



David Korse is the president and CEO of IDG World Expo, the producers of such popular technology exhibition and conference events as MacWorld and LinuxWorld. With more than two decades of experience in the event industry, Korse is a frequent industry speaker. He is a board member and immediate past chairman of the Society of Independent

Show Organizers and a member of the board of The Center for Exhibition Industry Research.

Go your own way.

"If somebody is competing in the marketplace, we are obviously going to do the best we can to compete and get our fair share, or more than our fair share of the market. But we really aren't guided by what somebody else is doing, because at the very best that means we're doing the same thing in following someone else. We need to set our own definition and our own standards and hopefully make the others follow or try to catch up."

See the big picture.

"We try to understand how we are going to define the event and the marketplace and what the niche is. Try to define the universe of buyers and sellers, and what the issues are — the past performance of that market and the current and future forecast performance. Evaluate competitive media, not only events but also publications, Web sites, and other media in the marketplace to understand how people are getting their information and how buyers and sellers are currently getting what they need from that market."

Push me, pull you.

"Talk to people on both sides — to exhibitors about what their challenges are, what they are trying to accomplish and what their plans are going forward; and to visitors about what their needs are, what kind of education they require. Each of our events has an advisory board made up of both buyers and sellers and in many cases editors who are experts in the industry who try to give us their advice as a steering committee to ensure the event is moving in the right direction for that industry sector. We rely on the

community to give us feedback about where we are, where we should be trying to get to and suggestions on how we get there."

Solve points of pain.

"The overly simple answer is that it's all about value. It's all about presenting the visitor with a return on investment of their time. All of us are busier. It's difficult to get the time to go to an event unless there is a material benefit for your own personal objectives —visiting with existing suppliers, meeting new possible suppliers or looking at new products, or going for education or training of some kind, or a combination of those things. If you can't justify to yourself or to your boss that this is a good use of time and resources, you're not going to go.

"We have to focus on the points of pain. What are the events in your life making it more difficult at work that we might be able to solve through education or a face-to-face experience? And that's what our research focuses on: trying to find common problems within the visitor population that we can help them solve. If you do a good job of presenting the value proposition, you can get people there."

Don't lose focus.

"That was probably one of the things that hurt Comdex, because when it was a reseller event, for people who were going to resell computer stuff, that's where it got to be so successful. In its later years, the organizers started treating it like it was something different. It was like the biggest event for all IT stuff. It wasn't for resellers; it was for everybody. And when the market got bad, it really didn't have a reason to exist anymore because it wasn't part of the supply chain. And so it wasn't fundamentally critical to sell your product. The people who were going to Comdex weren't necessarily so much buyers as just people who were very interested in the technology. If you went to last couple of shows, three of the largest exhibitors the last couple of years were Mercedes Benz, the New York Stock Exchange and Bose. Tell me what part of IT is that?

"It lost its focus. Because Comdex doesn't mean anything, where it used to be self-defining, the definition went away. Branding is important. Definitions can change; they just have to reflect where the market is now. It's when the two don't add up ..."

Do.

"At some point in time the research has to stop, and if you still feel very strongly and positive about the concept, you have to launch it. It will either live or die in the market and the market will decide."

throughout the region, Greer saw an audience he could speak to. While Greer still hopes to tap into a familiar outdoor market, he didn't want to duplicate the boat show, an event that gave him his expo experience. He aims to create a unique event brand grounded in its own particular niche.

"A boat show is a great idea," said Greer. "And yet what happens in major metropolitan areas is another show promoter wants to come in and start a similar show. There's head-to-head competition between the two shows, but there's nothing different. And it not only confuses the public, but also everyone who wants to be in the show. It makes them make a decision as to which one to support, or whether they have to do both."

A strong event brand can eliminate confusion in a crowded marketplace, said Post. It reduces a buyer's risk, because many of the expectations have been clearly defined. "You can brand without gazillions of dollars, but it can take an investment of money, time and talent. And probably some meeting planners feel overworked and overly extended already. But if they really do it, the benefits — the new revenues, the new people they are going to attract — will pay off. Branding is a competitive advantage, so I believe that meeting planners who brand will be more successful."

Both Sides Now

Conferences and shows are becoming increasingly important in corporate America. In 2004, 82 percent of companies surveyed are now including event marketing as part of their overall marketing mix, up more than six percentage points from the year before, according to a survey conducted by the George P. Johnson Company and the MPI Foundation.

MPI's Event Trends 2004 surveyed more than 200 marketing executives at corporations in the automotive, healthcare, high-tech and financial sectors with recorded sales of more than \$250 million. "Increasing media fragmentation combined with the need for consumer education to sort through the myriad of product options appears to be driving the increased interest in events," said the survey, "as over 92 percent of marketing executives said that the future importance of event marketing was increasing or stable."

Clearly, exhibitors are taking note of the value that events can have in building their own corporate brands. In some sense, particularly for a tradeshow and expo planner, creating a branded event involves cultivating relationships between multiple parties: attendees and vendors (i.e. buyers and sellers). An event's brand starts with the meeting planner and her company's overall goals.

"What is the organization all about?" said Barlow. "What is its strategy? Why is it in existence? What is its uniqueness? What does it offer its customers, and what promises are they making to them around events?" According to MPI research, potential exhibitors are "putting greater emphasis on events that offer information and move the consumer toward selecting the companies' own brands."

Marketers understand that consumers also are becoming more immune to media messages. They'd rather

experience the product brand instead. Opportunities to "increase product knowledge" and "increase brand preference" were both more important to marketers in 2004, according to MPI data — a natural fit for tradeshow or conferences that garner attendees' trust. IDG World Expo's Korse believes that an event must build its own identity by clearly defining how it will serve both attendees and those companies hoping to market their wares (see sidebar "Building an Event Brand").

"So the event definition has to clearly communicate who the event is for, what the market segment is, who are the buyers and who are the sellers," said Korse. "And it also has to identify in this particular iteration what the current themes or topics are, because those will change from year to year or presentation to presentation, depending on where that industry is."

An event brand involving exhibitors must deliver a clear set of expectations for both vendors and attendees. "We have tried to come up with a single focused idea that captures the public's attention," said Porchlight Productions' Greer of his upcoming Lake Home & Cabin Shows. "You have to be real honest with yourself and ask: What's in it for the customer? What's in it for the potential exhibitor? You have to think of them, instead of thinking: We are going to build this and you are going to like it."

At the Lake Home & Cabin Show, Greer will create opportunities for vendors to engage visitors. One exhibit will feature birds from the University of Minnesota Raptor Center in a uniquely constructed habitat that will include live trees. The trees and brush will also be suspended eight to 12 feet above the show floor atop the tradeshow booths. Across the hall from the raptor habitat, an observation deck will be constructed to look like those found at area nature centers. At the observation deck, which is sponsored by Nikon, vendors will teach visitors how to use binoculars and various spotting scopes to view live and mounted birds among the assembled foliage.

"This will allow them put products to use in a setting that makes sense to them," said Greer, "because birding and wildlife observation is just a huge activity, especially for the lake home and cabin crowd."

A show's "brand story" can "be used to broaden and deepen the brand concept further by relating memorable examples to human concerns, aspirations and emotions," writes Barlow in *Branded Customer Service*. The relationship between a vendor and show can be enhanced by such stories, she said, as they "capture the essence of the past and yearning for the future."

Greer's tagline for the Lake Home & Cabin Show embodies his event brand's story: "Life should always be this fun." The message is delivered throughout the show, from signage to brochures and event themes, said Greer. "That gets after a feeling that you work all week and then you want to come home and relax. And if you live on a lake here or have a cabin, you need that balance in your life."

For event planners working at nonprofit organizations, the foundation for the relationship between vendors, attendees and the event can be built on the nonprofit's philanthropic mission. Often called "cause marketing,"

many corporations enhance the value of their brands by their involvement with a nonprofit's worthy goals and charitable mission.

Jill Evenocheck, executive director of the Minnesota Chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, believes in the power of stories to shape the identity of her organization and its events, along with those corporations that choose to participate. Throughout the year, the Minnesota chapter produces 25 events — walks, golf outings, banquets, a wine tasting and more — designed to raise awareness of the disease and raise money to fund medical research. At most events, patients living with the disease will tell their personal stories. The foundation's mission itself forms the basis and theme for its varied branded experiences.

It is this brand relationship that nonprofit events have established with their audiences that has proved successful in courting corporations to participate as sponsors. In turn, corporate sponsorships help to raise the profile of the foundation's mission, said Evenocheck. While MPI data shows how the popularity of using event sponsorships as a way to increase brand awareness is beginning to wane with the corporate set, cause marketing remains a win-win for companies and charities involved, she said, "not only because it creates awareness, but it also generates a lot of revenue."

"No matter whether you are working for a nonprofit or for-profit, people only have so many hours in the day, and they have only so much money," she said. "How are you going to create something that is going to make them spend their time and money with you? That is by creating a first-class experience. As a consumer, you have limited resources; you want to make sure that when you're spending them you feel good about it."

The Devil's in the Details

Creating a tagline and a plan to appeal to everyone involved with your event is only the beginning, an opening chapter to your brand story. Stop there and it's all hot air. Delivering on a promise is key.

Brands are as much a way of conducting business as they are about building a reputation or an identity, writes Barlow in *Branded Customer Service: The New Competitive Edge*. A good brand, said Barlow, will not only "set the anticipation in the minds of the consumers who use the brand, it will create it in the employees who deliver it as well."

Fulfilling the brand promise involves execution. This so-called "branded customer service" seals a brand's fate, particularly with an event. "Some events are good at saying the world will bounce up and down if you come to their event," said Barlow. "And then it doesn't happen; in fact the opposite might happen. A person might end up coming to that event and really finding out it's like a bait and switch. They've been told they were going to get this but really what they got was a sales pitch to buy something later."

It goes without saying that an event's success is often measured financially. Yet it's just as obvious a statement to say that a customer — either a vendor or an attendee — determines whether an event was "successful" based largely on the event host's actual performance or the perception of

performance.

"There's that old rule of thumb that, well, they already bought the product so you give them a brown paper bag," said Porchlight Productions' Greer. "No. That's not what you want to do when you want them to come back. You want them to 'shop' there again."

Customers will become repeat customers, and tell their friends about your event, only when their experiences match their expectations. And those expectations derive from the promise delivered by the brand.

"If an organization doesn't consciously make that decision of what their brand is and what they stand for, then the public will do it for them and they will do it in a very haphazard way," said Barlow. "And it will happen by accident rather than by design, and it is a lot easier to control if it is done by design."

A few years ago at IDG World Expo's LinuxWorld, an IT show for developers using the popular software platform, visitors became frustrated when they couldn't talk to someone about their computing problems. They wanted to talk to a fellow techie. "What vendors have traditionally done is have sales and marketing people on the stand in the booth, more so than engineering people," said IDG World Expo's Korse. Visitors had paid the admission fee and made the effort to attend the show and meet with vendors for the answer to one simple question: Will your product work with my applications?

"They really don't want to talk to a salesperson at that point," said Korse. "They are past that; they are already in the booth. They want to engage in meaningful dialogue, and coming to the show just to be told that someone will call them later is not the reaction or reinforcement they are looking for."

So expo officials presented feedback to their vendor clients and told them it would be good to have someone available to simply answer questions. As a result, nearly every exhibitor now staffs technically competent professionals in the booths "who understand the issues, address the technology and give consultative information as opposed to just sales and marketing information," said Korse. And they are enhancing the event brand in the process.

Building an event brand helps event planners not only set expectations, but also determine what they need to do at their event to meet them. Every event activity can be conducted with the overall theme in mind.

"Some of the very successful events that I've been in, those themes get played over and over again in every way — whether through language, through music, through the materials that are given to participants, through the advertising and at the event," said Barlow. "I think that can help a lot. At every single meeting participants might attend at one of these events, they still get a sense that the overall thrust or consistent theme was met."

At the Lake Home & Cabin Show premiere, Greer hopes to manage the customer's experience by minding as many details as possible. Freestanding kiosks designed by a set builder will surround the exhibit hall entrance. Made to look like the interior of a cabin, the design will include items associated with an idyllic lake setting: a worn coat hanging in

a closet, an old fishing rod, a Coleman lantern next to a pair of antique snowshoes. Plans also call for quiet nature sounds to blend with a subtle whiff of pine needles to be piped into the entrance area. "You want to get to their senses and immediately put them in a good mood," said Greer, "so they know they are entering something special."

Yet, many meeting planners are, to a certain degree, at risk, said Barlow, because they have to depend on others — everyone from site facility staff to presenters at breakout sessions — to deliver. Organizations can develop an image and then work to align their services and products to the overall company mission and brand, she said. But managing an event brand is more involved.

"A planner will get to the point where they want to manage an entire experience for the customer," she said. "That gets tricky, because you are no longer managing just products and look, design and image; you are also managing people's behavior. Looking at the research, it is people's behavior that has the biggest impact on reinforcing what your brand is about."

It can prove difficult, but managing the details can pay dividends. IDG World Expo attempts to maintain brand consistency throughout every part of event planning, including how its partners act. For example, much of the physical layout is the same at each LinuxWorld show held around the globe. If possible, floor plans are made consistent at each venue, within cultural and physical boundaries of each exhibition hall. Logos are the same, as are show brochures. Even aisle carpeting is identical at every event; it's blue.

we know that already.' It's all about that customer loyalty and building credibility."

The Mismeasure of Brand

Research has shown that products with well-respected brands, including events, yield higher margins, generate more profit, demonstrate more growth and offer lower risk than their competitors. Yet, when it comes time to actually increase the value of your own brand, it's difficult to know where to start. It's difficult to even measure what your event brand is worth. Where do you find a measurable R in the ROI?

While the use of face-to-face events for corporate marketers is on the rise, according to the MPI Event Trends 2004 report, "shifts are apparent in the objectives that marketers are seeking from internal and external events." Traditionally corporations relied on events and sponsorships to increase brand awareness, yet the latest data found "a sharpening focus" on the role of events in educating both internal and external audiences, and the delivery of measurable results.

"It all comes down to how we collect the data in the first place," said Robert Passikoff, founder and president of Brand Keys. Passikoff's company has developed research and branding programs for clients such as Toyota, Apple and *U.S. News and World Report*. Passikoff said many of the traditional methods event planners have used to measure the value of their brands and marketing efforts have failed to show the accountability planners are looking for.

"You want to get to their senses and immediately put them in a good mood, so they know they are entering something special."

— Dave Greer

Oracle is a major exhibitor at many LinuxWorld events around the world, said Korse. In fact the same crew sets up the exhibit booth at each expo. Oracle employees are able to recognize that they are part of the same event, he said, no matter the expo hall. In so doing, the event is already able to subtly deliver on a set of brand expectations, before a single attendee has even arrived. With similar layouts and expo conditions, vendors receive signals that the event will live up to its brand promise.

At every event it conducts, IDG World Expo uses what's been dubbed a "branding guide," a handbook with each of its partners' expectations and actions spelled out to a degree, said Korse, so that "every one of our partners around the globe works from the same document."

"We try to do things identically so that it does appear to be a brand," he said. "That way, when we launch in a new market, even though the event has never been there before and it really is new, our brand still gives us some momentum. Our clients say, 'Oh it's a LinuxWorld event;

"Events are sadly behind the times in terms of being able to generate the kinds of insights in order to be able to plan," Passikoff said. "We can't do that anymore." Too often, event planners try to measure the value of their event using attendance figures, which can often be misleading.

"This year's Super Bowl filled the stadium, but that's not the metric," said Passikoff. "The metric is, 'What do these people expect and how do we meet these needs?' They could attend your event, but still be unsatisfied. People tend to look at the gestalt and don't take into account the individual pieces that form the structure of the event. Unless you are able to identify those as well, you really don't have a sense of what to build on and what people are looking for. Traditional marketing doesn't do it."

Vendors' expectations must also be met if event planners are to build a successful event brand. And many vendors are beginning to get savvy about how they determine whether an event lived up to the challenge. They are beginning to understand that "the number of hits on a

Web site or media impressions does not necessarily translate to increased awareness, knowledge or preference relating to a brand," according to Event Trends 2004.

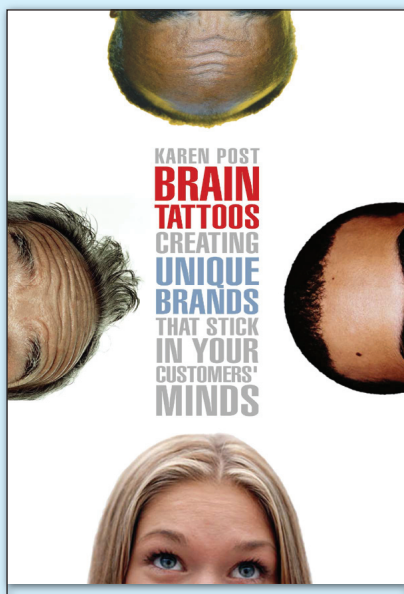
The number of people who are aware of your product or who can recognize your logo no longer measures branding success. "Before it might have been, 'How many T-shirts did I give away?' 'How many times did we need to refill the candy bowl?' How many participated in the putting contest?" Now the question is, "What kind of leads do my sales people have that they didn't have before?" said IDG World Expo's Korse. "So, everybody's objectives have changed. It's more about a quality encounter with a return on investment on both sides of the aisle."

More executives plan to quiz conference, tradeshow and seminar attendees to measure changes in their attitudes after exposure to Web advertising and PR efforts, according to MPI event research. And vendors are not alone in looking

for ways to measure how well an event lived up to its promise. Nearly 67 percent of meeting planners always or frequently measure return on their meeting investments, according to FutureWatch 2005, another survey conducted annually by MPI. Most frequently, 81 percent of respondents used the post-event attendee survey.

Yet, answers to such questions as "Are you happy with this event?" "Would you recommend it?" and "Would you attend it again?" do not always prove reliable. Satisfaction is a lagging indicator, said Brand Key's Passikoff. "Keep in mind that you need to measure what they think, not what they say they think. Everyone means well when doing final evaluations. The fact is that kind of thing can be misleading. What you want to make sure is that you are getting the kind of data that you build on. Excellent answers to meaningless questions are generally not very helpful."

BUILD A BRAIN TATTOO



Karen Post, a branding consultant, columnist, and author of the book *Brain Tattoos, Creating Unique Brands that Stick in Your Customers' Minds*, defines a brand as "the psychological impression of value-based emotions lodged in the mind of a buyer." Meetings spoke with Post about her four essential components that make up the "essence of a brand," whether it's a product, service or an event.

"A brand is your mental mark that is the crucial factor in a consumer's purchasing decision—in this case the decision to go to someone's event versus stay home or attend another event. For anybody who competes with another entity—another product, another event, anything—the brand can be the advantage that makes the buying decision easy.

"First, you must clearly know who you are, what you are about and what you offer

the market. So if it's an event, do you offer them education? Do you offer them entertainment? Do you service a certain niche market? Do you clearly understand who you are, what your capabilities are, what your resources are, and what you provide to the world to make it more enjoyable or to deliver some sort of benefit? If you cannot identify who you are and boil it down to a 15-second elevator speech, that means you've got work to do.

"The second piece is your point of difference. As you compete, there are many other events that offer a lot of similar things: quality information, exciting entertainment — all of these things. So you have got to come up with something that will stand out from the sea of sameness. And this is probably the most difficult part of branding, because people get into the comfort zone, and they get a little lazy, and they put their arms around things that really aren't points of difference. So in the situation of a meeting, they might say, 'Well we have all of these resources under one roof.' Well, so do other meetings. Or they might say, 'The vendors that exhibit at our meeting, they are all the best quality.' Well everyone says that. So those are the kinds of things that you really have to take a hard look at. Play devil's advocate, and say, 'Are these really points of difference?' Or could you cover up the logo on your event and could someone think it's a competitor's event?

"So points of difference certainly could be a niche that your event services. It could be something from your history. Maybe your show or your event, or whatever you are doing, has been around a thousand years, and that could be a part of your point of difference. Possibly it's the style of your event. Maybe you are

very progressive, very futuristic, very state-of-the-art. That could be your point of difference if in fact your competitors are taking the more traditional route. There are a hundred different things that can be a point of difference. In branding, the more distinct your point of difference can be, the more difficult it is to copy and you will just stand out more. So your advertising and your marketing investments will become much more efficient, versus everyone thinking you are just like the other meeting down the street.

"The third piece is the brand personality. I like to associate any sort of brand, and event brand as well, with characteristics a human would have. So just like if you were describing one of your buddies and you want to introduce them to some young lady, you wouldn't say, 'My friend Joe's got two arms, two legs and some hair.' You'd say, 'Joe is really fun, high energy, a bit of a risk-taker, a great sense of humor.' So try to create and pretend that your brand is a person, and then incorporate those human attributes into your communication. It will be much easier for people to get what your brand is about.

"The fourth piece is the promise, and this is what you commit to deliver to the marketplace. And don't try promise everything, because then you are going to over promise and under deliver. Just pick something. For example, Southwest Airlines — their big promise is they allow anyone to travel. And so their promise is that they are the symbol of freedom and you are free to move about the world. That's their promise. So with your event, instead of focusing on the very logical feature-type things, think about a much larger emotional benefit that you bring to your audience."

Robin Kocina, president of the Burnsville-based Mid-America Events and Expos, views measuring ROI as an ongoing process. As a sister company to Media Relations, a public relations firm representing clients in the health, fitness and supplement industries, Mid-America Events and Expos produced its first events in 2001: a Seniors Expo, and the Body Mind Life Expo. The company has since grown to include two annual seniors' expos along with the Women's Home Expo.

Customers will become repeat customers, and tell their friends about your event, only when their experiences match their expectations. And those expectations derive from the promise delivered by the brand.

Feedback, from vendors and attendees alike, is critical to the success of the varied event brands, said Kocina. It's part of the relationship customers and vendors have with her events to know that input is welcome. It also keeps them fresh and current, she said. This year, as a result of a lunch with more than 10 seniors and longtime customers, new additions will be featured at the spring Seniors Expo, including a fashion show and information sessions regarding insurance.

Clients have shaped the Body Mind Life Expo brand over the years as well, said Kocina, by offering more information and sessions directed toward health services. "Many of the same visitors and exhibitors attend the shows each year, so we have to make them different." She also stays in touch with vendors throughout the year via a weekly newsletter, giving them exhibition tips and letting them know the work that is going on behind the scenes between shows.

One foolproof measure informs Kocina as to the state of her brand. Past attendees may sign up to be on a mailing list that would grant them access to VIP tickets to the shows. Currently, more than 9,000 have signed on, "probably more if you count the e-mail requests," said Kocina. "I do lots of advertising to keep events focused on the right demographic. But I think a lot of how we bring people is because we have created a following."

And that's exactly when you know you've succeeded in creating and maintaining an event brand. The brand audience will begin to trust it, said Barlow. "And when that happens you really have a brand. They say: I know what they are going to stand for and I know what they are going to deliver. If I want that experience, all I have to do is show up and I know I am going to have it. And that's real trust." ■

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bottomline

While many misconceptions exist regarding "branding," its techniques are being used throughout business to do more than simply build an identity for products. They are being used to build strong identities for events as well. Branding has been defined a couple of ways: "the psychological impression of value-based emotions, lodged in the mind of a buyer," or the "sum of all a company offering does through every point of contact." This is just as important for event planners to understand as it is for product marketers. Strategic branding allows planners to deliver a product that is unique to the market, establish and reinforce their message by building a strong personal connection with their customer/attendee, and in turn create an event that is very difficult for competitors to copy. And that's something that's meant to last.