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## Drawing the optimal media crowd

Craig McGuire - 13 Nov 2006 10:42

### To get top journalists to your event, you must give them a compelling reason to attend.

The media wants information it can use. An obvious statement, but one some event producers seem to forget.

Offering free gifts has long been a popular formula for attracting attendees, but event planning must extend way beyond that to get the attention of today's reporter.

Wal-Mart seems to get this. Operating 3,800-plus US stores and 2,600 more abroad that serve a combined 176 million customers weekly, the mega retailer enjoys a battalion that hangs on its every press release. Two such announcements came recently.

The company announced in October that it was replacing its employees' familiar blue vests with blue polo shirts and khakis. A few weeks before, it announced a pilot program in Florida to sell 30-day prescriptions of dozens of generic medications for \$4.

Each announcement affected thousands of people. Events for either would likely draw packs of reporters. However, only one touched on the affordability of prescription medicines - making it of interest to Fred Baldassaro's grandmother.

"The Grandmother Principle to event planning goes like this: If my grandmother isn't interested, it's probably not worth an event," says Baldassaro, a VP at Edelman, Wal-Mart's AOR. The firm staged events for the program in Tampa in September and in Orlando and Little Rock, AR, in October.

"The natural inclination in our industry is to launch an event for anything," he adds. "In the back of your mind, ask, 'Will [my] client think all those billable hours are worth it when he's staring out at just two cameras?'"

When tracking big game, like that elusive journalist that can deliver a nationwide hit, the hunter must think like the hunted.

Try prying *Time* reporter Lisa McLaughlin away from her desk without the right lure.

"There has to be that value-add, something I can't experience with a press kit, something you have to show me in person," she says.

She adds that these hooks should be clearly and concisely communicated in the invitation. And, never bait and switch.

"Last night I attended an event that was promised as a preview of an upcoming trade show

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that turned out to be just cocktails and a gift bag," McLaughlin says. "It was frustrating because I don't have time [for that]. It must help prepare me to write my story."

Earlier in her career, journalist Karen Hochman frequented media events at least once a week, sometimes more. However, with the added responsibilities that came with her rise to editor of *The Nibble*, an online magazine dedicated to gourmands, she has cut down on event-going significantly.

"Now, if you want me, I must feel I will learn something," she says. "I expect the equivalency of a university lecture."

"I know the market," Hochman continues, "so I really don't like it when they position themselves as the only player. Explain to me how you're different, both in the invitation and at the event, if you expect me to attend."

Anna Wolfe, editor of *Gourmet News*, a monthly trade title for food and kitchenware retailers, runs into similar problems.

"I'd love for PR pros to do their homework on my publication before pitching me," she says. "At least 15 times a week, I receive calls about covering restaurant openings."

Both Hochman and Wolfe cite Food Fête, press-event producer for specialty food, beverage, and kitchenware companies, as a sage practitioner.

"A huge challenge is managing exhibitor expectations for press attendance," says Jeff Davis, producer at Food Fête. "When sharing the media RSVP list with exhibitors, I tell them the only thing I can guarantee is that some of those on the list won't make it."

Despite the need to lock in RSVPs, he says he'd rather deal with anxious clients than pressure journalists to make commitments they may shy away from.

Instead, Davis advises, select a venue and time that is as convenient as possible for the press. And, enable reporters who did not RSVP to register on-site.

As for those who do not make it, "E-mail [them] with a bulleted recap of what they missed," Davis advises, "so they will hopefully attend next time."

### Technique tips

#### DO

Organize an event only when you have something very newsworthy to offer

Develop a media advisory/invitation that clearly and concisely reveals the newsworthiness of the event

Check credentials to keep out undesirables posing as journalists

#### DON'T

Bait your invitation with a promise of a news hook that is not fulfilled by your event

Organize an event when another distribution technique will have the same impact

Over-promise on attendance. Managing clients' expectations is critical for success

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