13 Capturing the Learning

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Learning objectives

- To examine and apply how evaluation can be completed.

- To apply evaluation design guidance.

Introduction

The very nature of events as unique, transient and largely intangible occurrences mean they sometimes do not readily lend themselves to close interrogation to extract learning. However, by applying established and contemporary social science research methods to strategic events evaluation and management, it is possible to achieve successful results that would enable an events organisation to learn and plan for future events. This chapter will explore various methods through which event creators can successfully extract learning from events. It will suggest an alternative approach to the traditional post event evaluation: one in which strategic event evaluation can be embedded throughout the event lifecycle as an iterative process.

Ultimately the central tenet of this chapter is that event creators should consider the evaluation of their progress as a key part of the design process. It should not be left as an afterthought and something to be completed only post event. With some creative thinking, the evaluation should become an actual part of the event, essential to demonstrate that the stakeholders' objectives have been achieved. This chapter, consistent with the previous chapter, argues that the event creator must consider the evaluation as one of the key components during the design process. However, it should be noted that the following content focuses specifically on how the evaluation can be conducted. This is contrasted with Chapter 12 where the emphasis is on the metrics and measurements event creators can use.

Evaluating strategic objectives

Strategic event evaluation should be with the intention of reflecting and learning, either as an institution or organisation, or as part of the event experience, to enhance future outcomes for all stakeholders and for the event creator specifically, as each event represents a point in time in their career. In the context of event evaluation, it is useful to consider evaluation under one or more of three broad objectives. These objectives are the reasons why the evaluation should take place, be strategically planned and embedded within the whole event creation process:

1   Evaluation can be used to inform decisions relating to the effectual on-going design of the event in progress

2   Conducting evaluation enables creators to capture and showcase the event and the important outcomes

3   After reflecting on the evaluation, it can lead to strategic learning, planning and enhancing future event creation (including demonstrating the success or otherwise of the event)

These objectives are discussed in more detail in Chapter 12. However, in exploring the reasons to complete an event evaluation there is one further feature to consider. If events are being increasingly seen as a means to an end, and not an end in themselves, then what needs to be evaluated? As argued in Chapter 1, if organisations are using events as a catalyst to achieve wider strategic outcomes, the event creator needs to carefully consider what should be evaluated. Should the event itself be evaluated or are the wider strategic objectives the aspects to be measured? If so, it poses the challenges of measuring longer term, complex and multifaceted objectives.

Strategic learning

In relation to capturing the learning, it is useful to review the five guiding principles – as set out in Chapter 1 of this book. These also serve as general principles for conducting strategic event evaluation:

☐   *Outcome obsessed:* any evaluation should be aligned to the objectives set. The event creator needs to ask "have the outcomes been met?" If not, why not, and what can be learnt from the event? As event objectives are likely to be varied and take account of different stakeholders, it is a necessity for the evaluation to be pluralistic. The outcomes and objectives of events must be relevant, suitable and achievable. There is little value in setting unrealistic outcomes for an event. Doing the essential preliminary pre-event research allows for confidence that the outcomes are achievable.

☐ *Stakeholder centric outlook:* Not only should the research be objective based, but it should also be pluralistic in nature. By this we mean it should engage with multiple stakeholders to build a fuller picture of the event and not rely on one group of stakeholders - traditionally the participants, attendees or delegates. Instead the evaluation should consider the wider stakeholders, for example the local communities where events are held/hosted. The UK health service provides a useful example of pluralistic evaluation, and the events discipline can draw parallels. Any evaluation should document the different ideas and notions of success from the different groups, but also take account of the different motives and interests – "success is a pluralistic notion. It is not a unitary measure" (Smith and Cantley, 1985, pg.172). Chapter 2 of this book provides a summary of stakeholder engagement with Chapters 3 to 6 considering some of the main event stakeholders.

☐ *Purposeful design:* Chapter 1 puts forward an argument that the component parts of event design need to integrate and align to allow for a cohesive event experience. As described in the introduction to this chapter, the evaluation can be planned in such a way that it adds to the event experience. So in one sense evaluation needs to be planned into the overall event architecture. Furthermore, if we consider the evaluation as one component part, and as a form of research, it also needs careful planning on its own merit.

☐ *Strategic persona:* Evaluation can be done for one or more of the three main reasons, listed above and in Chapter 12. With the focus on event outcomes and the resulting learning, it then follows that evaluation is strategic in nature.

☐ *Reflective practitioner:* By considering all of the above, it forces the event creator to embrace a reflective outlook. Asking questions on what has been achieved (outcomes), from a variety of interested parties (stakeholders), taking a systematic and rigorous approach (purposeful design), with the view to learning (strategic persona) are the key ingredients to becoming a reflective events practitioner.

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What needs to be captured?

In order to recognise what needs to be captured, first it needs to be established why the evaluation is taking place. The reason for the evaluation will impact upon how the data is gathered. We have already contended that the evaluation can take place for a range of reasons. Completing evaluation during the on-going events phase may take a different form to the evaluation conducted during or post event.

For example, consider completing an evaluation of the participant experience during a music concert. What is the best way to gather data from those attending the event? The temporal nature of most events has consequences for what people may be prepared to do during the actual event. Will individuals want to sacrifice time to complete a questionnaire or discuss in detail how they are feeling? This may force the evaluation towards a post-event design, in which case it can be argued that evaluation is not at all 'during' the occasion but instead is somehow retrospective.

Completing post-event evaluation the event creator needs to be aware of other limitations. The objectives of bringing any large scale mega sporting event to a particular city, region or country (think Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, Tour de France) may be justified through the often quoted legacy (see Chapter 11 for further discussion). Long term evaluation can be complicated, difficult to manage and expensive. If the event creator wants to complete a longitudinal evaluation with organisations and individuals, how can they ensure continued engagement and limit respondent attrition whilst managing the cost of the evaluation? Again these are key issues that may impact on what the event creator can realistically achieve during the evaluation.

Designing event evaluation often results in a compromise, can be contradictory in nature or produce ambiguous data. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that respondents may have their own agendas and reasons for completing event evaluations. It can also be complex, time consuming and impossible to come to an absolute conclusion. Evaluating objectives from multiple stakeholders – sponsors, participants, venues, local communities – adds further dimensions. It may be that the event creator has to prioritise the key objectives for evaluation and leave others which are less significant.

Many authors consider evaluation as part of the event design process. Table 13.1 summarises some of the prominent views on how data can be collected during an event evaluation.

■   Using existing sources

Information from reports, financial records, market research and journal articles can be used to evaluate events or wider markets. Within general research studies and particularly academic research, secondary data is often collected at the initiation of a project to inform the study design and help contextualise the setting. However, the nature of the events discipline has seen secondary data being used in a much more direct and applied manner. Secondary data has many benefits when completing an event evaluation. These include reducing the cost and time, being able to utilise high quality and large data sets and opportunities to compare data over time (Byrman and Bell, 2003).