3 Managing Event Stakeholders

Expect the unexpected

Claire Drakeley

Introduction

The expectations of, and placed upon, event managers are often complex and frequently implicit. However, there is currently no overall template for determining professionalism within the sector, even though there are many examples of best practice in specific areas of work. Events of any form do not happen in isolation. Events, and event professionals, are mutually dependent upon clients, suppliers, venues, attendees, sponsors, and colleagues. Such relationships involve implicit expectations, relating to: communication, behaviour, decision-making, and collaboration. These are informed by a range of factors, such as: previous experiences, individual and organizational reputations, project constraints (e.g., time, cost and quality), and evolving circumstances. The last of these indicates that expectations are not static and can change in response to developments in the client/supplier relationship, or because of any other environmental factor.

These issues can lead to misaligned expectations of the event manager's role or performance, and present challenges to managers of all types of events, regardless of scale or scope. If we can minimise either this misalignment, or the expectations themselves, then events will run more effectively, will be more likely to achieve their objectives, will make best use of the resources available, and will enable positive collaboration between stakeholders. Understanding and managing misaligned expectations is a key step in overcoming event failures, given the importance and complexity of stakeholders.

In this chapter, we will focus on stakeholder management from the service provider perspective, to consider how poor client relationships can lead to event management failure. Many of the models and tools used here are more frequently applied to the customer relationship, and within this chapter we are focused on their application to the client-service provider relationship. This discussion utilises the cornerstone theories of stakeholder management (Mitchell *et al.*, 2017;

Savage *et al*., 1991; Rowley, 1997; Oliver, 2010; Wallace & Michopoulou, 2019; Van Niekerk, 2016; Van Niekerk & Getz, 2019) to evaluate the failures in expectation management as demonstrated in two case studies. By combining different expectation management models such as Expectation Disconfirmation Theory and Service Gap Analysis (Zeithaml *et al*., 1993), we can understand the root causes of these failures in order to address those issues in the development and delivery of future event projects.

To help do this, we will use a case study of a year-long engagement programme to explore the complexities of a public sector client's expectations from an agency perspective and how mistakes were made from the beginning. As a comparison, we will also look at the operational expectations for a corporate event project from the venue perspective, and how lack of explicit communication of expectations almost jeopardised the event.

Theoretical perspectives

The events sector is vast and multi-faceted (Bowdin *et al*.., 2011) and the process of event production and delivery is considered by some to be a dark art (Hearn, 2007). Event management is a professional service and, as articulated by Ojasalo (2001: 200), the customer expectations are therefore "*fuzzy, implicit and unrealistic*".

In this section, we will consider four primary theoretical perspectives that intertwine to inform our understanding of how failure to manage expectations underpins event mismanagement:

- Expectation Theory
- Stakeholder Management
- Client Management
- Social Identity Theory

By considering expectation management through these theoretical perspectives, we will critically evaluate our case studies to help us learn from our mistakes.

Expectation theory

Expectation theory (also commonly known as Expectancy-Disconfirmation theory) is the most widely accepted theoretical principle concerning customer satisfaction processes (Oliver, 1996; Ojasalo, 2001; Oliver, 2010; Huang, 2015; Tran *et al*., 2021). This theory posits that satisfaction/dissatisfaction results from a customer's comparison of performance (of a product or service) with predetermined standards of performance, which are the customer's predictive expectations.

Three possible outcomes of the comparison with the expectation disconfirmation model (EDM) are possible:

- **Positive disconfirmation,** which occurs when performance is perceived to be better than the predetermined expectations, so the customer is delighted.