

# 1

# Strategic Event Creation

**Phil Crowther**

## Learning objectives

- Interpret the changing forces which define the environment for event creation.
- Appreciate why and how the role of event creation is evolving.
- Understand the definition and five pillars of Strategic Event Creation.

## Introduction

Changes in the wider environment have triggered a new normal for event creation. Heightened attendee expectations, a keener focus upon the return required by funders and wider stakeholders, and, of course, an ever more competitive event marketplace, are three significant influences which have intensified the challenge of event creation. Whichever sector of the events industry we consider, these forces are influential, to differing degrees, in shaping the environment. Alongside these foremost factors, there are other significant considerations, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), globalisation, and technology, which transform the contexts within which events are created. All of the above circumstances are interconnected and combine to represent a step change in the environment and challenge of event creation, undoubtedly making it a much more strategic and multi-layered responsibility. Consequently change is required in how we, as event creators and scholars think about, and approach, the discipline of event management.

Although still at an early stage, event education has prospered and matured considerably in the last two decades. This has provoked considerable advancement in academic thinking which is expressed through the growing body of literature. Much of this echoes the event management

dominant approach, as characterised by Brown (2014), with events being planned, managed, and process driven as embodied in the influential EMBOK framework (International EMBOK Executive, 2009). Recently, however, there has been a shift in the literature placing renewed emphasis on event design (for example Berridge, 2012; Brown, 2005) as distinct from the more operational tone of event management. This development is significant and in this book we articulate it as the transition from an input orientation to an outcome dominant mindset, which we straightforwardly label 'outcome obsessed'. We argue that inputs are integral, yet they should be subordinate to the outcomes. The mindset and approach of event creators should reflect this. Consequently as the event industry matures, the employability of graduates and the professionalisation of the field are directly linked to, and reliant upon, the outcomes that events generate.

In response, this book proposes *Strategic Event Creation* as both a management approach and an enlightened outlook which is more attuned to this new normal. Strategic Event Creation rises to the challenge of the above circumstances and in so doing offers event students and practitioners a progressive and effectual lens through which to perceive and undertake their quest of event design and delivery. Fundamentally it assumes an outcome obsessed and stakeholder-centric approach, advocating a view that event creators are most appropriately defined as the facilitators of positive outcomes for individuals and groups that are proactively involved with, or implicated as a consequence of the event occurring.

This chapter acts as the bedrock for the remainder of this book, initially in its examination of the changing landscape, secondly in the explanation of Strategic Event Creation and most importantly of the five principles that underpin the approach.

## **A shifting landscape for event creators**

The four interwoven factors discussed below underpin the need for change in how we, as event scholars and practitioners, perceive and execute the creation of events. The developments detailed below are not presented as entirely new phenomena; it is the acceleration in each of these forces, and their combined impact, that specifies a changing circumstance for event creation. They are also not presented as positive or negative, nor are they inherently damaging or destructive, they quite simply reshape the challenge we, as event creators, face.

## ■ Heightened attendee expectations

Ever since Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) first pinpointed the need for organisations to reconsider their view of consumption and embrace an experiential outlook, successive writers have commented upon the emergence, and growing primacy, of experience. The kind of experiences we, and our forefathers, only experienced in a planned event setting now flood many other aspects of our lives: retail, hospitality, travel, home entertainment and more. Indeed we educators, in colleges and universities, are now encouraged to purposefully generate experiences for our students. In so doing, practitioners, in these settings, are challenged to ponder many of the same considerations as event creators; how do they involve, immerse, generate intensity, individualise, and so forth (see Masterman and Wood's 7 Is, in Wood (2009)). This calculated design of experiences has become very big business.

These pervasive commercial experiences, as interpreted by writers such as Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) and Poulsson and Kale (2004), punctuate our lives. This trend has been accelerated further by the explosion of technology as organisations generate experiences to exceed, and hurriedly re-exceed, our expectations, even when we are not physically in their presence, through television, cinema, gaming, and hand held devices. We therefore perceive how the experience economy, as Pine and Gilmore (1998) labelled it, increasingly engulfs us as we journey through life.

For us, absorbed in the business of event creation, this is all very significant. We must recognise how people's periodic attendance at the planned events we create is interspersed by an abundance of sporadic micro experiences that infiltrate their everyday existence. Generally, our reaction as human beings to this constant exposure to these cleverly designed experiences is that we build immunity and typically demand equal, and greater, stimulation next time, if they are to resonate. As a society, our experience expectations are on an upward trajectory and consequently, as writers such as Schmitt (1999) and Smilansky (2009) allude to, the business of experience creation is inevitably dynamic and fast moving, it has to be. As creators of 'planned events' we do not exist in isolation of this wider experience marketplace. Our role is thus confounded by the glut of experiences our attendees consume elsewhere in their lives.

As event creators we now exist as one grouping within an ever more proliferated and widened community of experience creators – which positively makes our skills much more in demand. Our abilities to interpret attendee antecedents and insightfully shape their experiences become vital. Discussion of attendee experiences is specifically examined in Chapter 4, and clearly illustrated through Claire's voice below.

## Industry voice: Claire O'Neill, Senior Manager, Association of Independent Festivals, Co-founder, A Greener Festival, UK

Greater competition amongst festivals brings a sophistication and expectation amongst audience who are, to a degree, spoiled for choice. In addition, there are new audiences attending festivals who would not have done so ten plus years ago. More families and 'glampers' might expect a certain level of comfort and facilities at the events they attend. Events must meet these expectations to compete, and when they succeed to meet expectations more new audiences are attracted.

### ■ Competitive event marketplace

Favourably, a by-product of society's fondness of experience is that the events industry has, itself, flourished. Live events continue to be foremost providers of experiences; consequently in a world where consumers more than ever before desire experience (see literature on Generation Y, for example Davidson (2008)), and organisations increasingly recognise the rewards of triggering experiences, the marketplace for events will continue to prosper. We therefore see some of the most renowned commentators in the events field charting the increased number, size, scope and significance of events (Bowdin et al, 2011; Getz, 2012; Richards, 2013). As the industry flourishes we predictably see a growing competition between events and event organisations.

Intensified competition triggers the pursuit of differentiation and also logically fuels an escalation in participant expectations. It is within this context that we can recognise the growing value of proficient event creators. Getz (2012) stresses that experience is at the heart of the event, so it logically follows that event creators are the chief facilitator of these experiences (see Chapters 7 and 8 which focus upon experience design). Therefore, as we see busier event marketplaces, populated by more experience-savvy attendees and determined competitors, the abilities of those creating events become increasingly crucial.

The experiences and outcomes that event creators are able to initiate through their proficient and enlightened event design are influential both in ensuring a specific event is perceived as successful, but also in creating the conditions for future event success. The experiences and outcomes stakeholders and participants perceive through their engagement with an event inevitably influence the likelihood of their involvement with future events hosted by that organisation. Most events are not one-offs, and instead link to repeat or related events in future. Therefore the delivery of a given event is also a marketing channel to influence involvement in future events. This