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Strategic Event Evaluation

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Learning objectives

- Understand the strategic stakeholder centric approach to event evaluation.
- To realise the importance of on-going event evaluation.
- Realise the barriers to evaluation, how they can and should be overcome.

Introduction

This book has repeatedly encouraged an outcome focussed approach to event creation which is specifically discussed in the early chapters. Indeed a key characteristic of planned events is that they produce many and varied outcomes and impacts, which represent the consequences of an event, and their evaluation is to some degree required. Part Two of the book reviews the diversity of stakeholder objectives and concerns that underpin any event. The outcome based approach is however undermined if event creators do not sufficiently and proficiently embed evaluation throughout the process. Clearly evaluation is scalable and should be determined by the specific event context; stakeholders, size, future plans, and so forth are determining factors. A failure to do this has many adverse effects for both the current and any future events, and also stakeholder relationships. Nonetheless often evaluation is deficient, hence the contention is for practitioners to invest in evaluation in order to become more reflective in their approach.

A key challenge for event professionals is for evaluation to become 'what we do' rather than 'something else we have to do' and this chapter will provide readers with some of the key arguments and approaches to make evaluation an effective and a manageable aspect of event creation.

The next chapter builds upon this by considering much more specifically the methods that can be applied. Often when considering event evaluation, the conversation shifts quickly to the measurement of post event outcomes. While this is integral, a major contribution of this chapter is to identify the three pillars of event evaluation. The three purposes of evaluation, from an event creator's perspective are:

- 1 To aid decisions relating to the effective design and operations of the current event
- 2 To identify, explore, capture and communicate important outcomes to share with current and future stakeholders
- 3 To acquire learning and insight to benefit future event creation

Each of these factors has the potential to make a significant difference to the success of the current event, future events, and the general success for all stakeholders involved, not least the event creators themselves whose careers will be enhanced. Before progressing the discussion about how evaluation can be achieved, it is useful to reflect upon why evaluation in events does not always receive the same intensity of focus as it should. Each of the following reasons, many identified by research (MPI, 2011), represent legitimate explanations as to why evaluation remains an aspect of event creation where, as an industry, we must do better:

- Short-lived nature of both events and event teams limits the time available
- Difficulties in capturing intangible / soft outcomes increases the perceived complexity
- Wide variety of interests and experiences occurring through an event broadens the scope
- Future oriented nature of outcomes means evaluation cannot be isolated to the event itself
- Isolating event specific outcomes from wider influencing factors makes the results seem less reliable
- Potential cost of evaluation, both financially and in time, makes it less appealing than investing these resources in content or marketing

Although each of these points is understandable and certainly add to the evaluation challenge, collectively they must be considered as necessary hurdles to overcome rather than justifications to avoid, reduce, or generally downgrade evaluation. By adopting a proficient evaluation approach that is carefully integrated with the events design, each of the above loses their threat and can be ably managed. A key, and recurring, message in this and the next chapter is that the evaluation approach, to any given event, should be designed and embedded at an early stage as identified by Vladimir Vodolov.

Industry voice: Vladimir Vodalov, Director, EXIT Festival, Serbia

Evaluation is at least a few months of intensive work. But we have to constantly evaluate our work, economy, sustainability, programme, security, safety, visual identity, main message, where we are, where we wish to go. Without evaluation there is no change and without change there is no continuity. Evaluation of one's work is essential for success.

To achieve the three pillars of event creation, detailed above, event creators must collect information pre, during, and post event. This is in stark contrast to the view that sometimes prevails in events whereby evaluation is a bolt-on at the end.

The importance of event evaluation

It is useful to further explore this topic which was introduced above, and identified concisely in the three pillars. For event creators there are many persuasive reasons why evaluation should be considered important. First and foremost that success can be evidenced and showcased and that, equally, underperformance can be analysed. Events include many aspects, therefore successes and failures cannot be easily generalised and are often triggered by specific aspects of the event project and design. The overall success of an event is unlikely to be because every aspect of it is extremely effective. Successful events may contain faulty aspects and underachieving events very probably contain some effective aspects. Therefore well designed evaluation, which identifies the influential factors on the success of the event and provides the depth of insight required, is crucial. The identification of outcomes is hence closely linked to an understanding of how and why those outcomes were achieved. This learning is vital in enabling event creators to learn about which elements of their design works, therefore benefitting future event creation.

There are many other specific rationale for evaluation, some of which are considered below. Chapter 6 discusses the community and the environment, which increasingly is emerging as a vital consideration for event creators. The ability to capture these less immediate or obvious impacts, whether positive or negative, is extremely important in ensuring a positive relationship with this important stakeholder group (as Chapter 2 argues). Attendees are obviously a key stakeholder, as discussed in Chapter 4, and by evaluating carefully with this group an appreciation of their experience can be gathered. If designed effectively, this can also be a co-creative opportunity to engage with participants and benefit from their feed-forward to

influence the design of future events. These examples support the need for evaluation to be viewed and carried out on a longer-term basis and not as a one-off exercise, and also indicate the more holistic nature of evaluation. By doing this, both a formative evaluation is carried out during the event in order to improve it, and a summative evaluation is conducted post event (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, 2007), providing the stakeholders with a judgement of the event's value (Worthen and Sanders, 1987). Although much of the data may only need to be collected once during the event process, its collation and interpretation will have wider and longer term implications, as it is used to inform analysis and presentation relating to the current event, and much more significantly to support and inform future activity.

Regular research by the industry association MPI (Meeting Professionals International) has demonstrated that if business events are evaluated and results reported to key stakeholders, their budgets are more likely to increase or at least stay the same than with those who do not evaluate (see their current reports Meetings Outlook, previous publications are Business Barometer and EventView). It would seem logical to suggest this can be generalised beyond this sector as the process of evidencing outcomes has the potential to enhance relationships and increase trust. To some degree, effectual evaluation and the communication process beyond that is a very useful form of marketing towards future events. Sponsors who receive insightful evaluation relating to their desired ROI (Return on Investment) would seem more likely to wish to continue their relationship with that event. It should be noted that evaluations are also sometimes seen as threats to stakeholders as they are afraid of negative outcomes (MPI, 2011). Therefore, the development of collaborative evaluation approaches to break down these concerns is advisable.

Evaluation provides event creators, and other stakeholders, with powerful and rich information that is not easily identifiable from simply participating in the event. The scale of the evaluation undertaken will necessarily vary depending upon the size and context of the event. A key principle is therefore that evaluation should be proportionate to the event, so a larger event with more resources would seek to interrogate many more aspects and on a larger scale. By applying this logic the commonly perceived obstacles listed in the introduction, such as high costs, time and complexity, are reduced. The emphasis in this book is upon feasible evaluation approaches that are often relatively inexpensive in their resource intensity. See also some of the evaluation tools and methods discussed in the next chapter.