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The Importance of Market Research

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Qualtrics going above and beyond to wow conference delegates



Insert picture: Michael Phelps with Qualtrics CEO Ryan Smith at the 2017 Insights Summit. Photo courtesy of Qualtrics

Every year, some of the world's brightest minds and most iconic celebrities assemble in Salt Lake City, Utah, to impart their knowledge, network on the surrounding ski slopes, and rock out at a private concert. The Insight Summit, put on by Qualtrics, one of the fastest-growing technology companies in the world, achieved record highs in attendance in 2017 with 3,500 delegates, and continued the company's trend of improving the quality of the content and the overall experience. CEO Ryan Smith has taken the company from his parents' basement to the summit of the business world with a focus on making data

collection quick and easy for researchers who want to improve experiences. So the focus of the Qualtrics annual conference is on the attendees and providing them with the best possible experiences.

“The goal of Insight Summit is not to create an event for 3,500 people – it is to create 3,500 individual experiences within the context of one event,” says Kortney Osborne, Qualtrics Insight Summit Event Director. “Customer service is at the core of why our conference is so different from other conferences. I really think that customer service is part of Qualtrics’ DNA. It is something we have evolved and made stronger over the years, but customer obsession and customer experience is at the core of our culture, so from day one that was always a focus for us. It is not something that has had to be learned – it was always there and we have just built on it over time.”

Based from the opulent Grand America Hotel, the Qualtrics Insight Summit always includes sensational speakers – not least of which is company founder Ryan Smith – and amazing catering and evening entertainments (2017 included a private concert with Elton John). The conference culminates with a ski day at Park City, that in 2017 included an appearance from US Olympic skier Bodie Miller. “It was a last minute add,” says Osborne, “as we weren’t sure if his schedule would be able to accommodate it, and we didn’t want to promise something that might not happen. But when we found out for sure, we decided to make it an extra element to wow our attendees. Feedback has been phenomenal, with those delegates who happened to be in the right place at the right time thrilled to be able to interact with such a high profile skiing celeb in a very personal way. It gave that lasting impression at the end of the event to really make it a great experience”.

Julia Giona, Head of Public Relations, says Qualtrics understands two things implicitly – build amazing products and treat customers well. And this philosophy filters down to the annual conference. “One of our key values is ‘customer obsessed’, so whether you are in PR, accounting, or marketing, everything is done with the customer experience in mind, and attention to detail is paramount. Even the color of the flowers at the event were coordinated to match the event branding. Julia says the conference is very important for her “because it is the one time of year I can meet so many clients in one spot and learn more about their use of our platform, what benefits they gain from using Qualtrics, and get ideas about how best to promote their successes in the media.”

Everyone on the team involved in the conference has to go through training, working through a 50-page training manual written especially for the event. “Training emphasizes the type of customer and brand experience we want to deliver. For example, if an attendee stops you in a corridor and asks ‘where do I sign up for the ski day’ you don’t just direct them – you take them there and ensure it gets done – you don’t leave until the customer is satisfied,” says Julia. “We stress that this is a customer appreciation event so everyone is in the mindset of ‘how can we help?’ Our goal is to make it the best event they’ve attended.”

Qualtrics use their experience management platform to measure the success of each event, and get feedback from attendees. “We then make changes based on feedback – the content, the flow for example” says Kortney. “Entertainment is influenced by feedback. But also smaller things – attendees in the past for example asked for healthier snacks during the breakouts so we have changed the food options over the years. For next year, we will change our registration process in response to comments from delegates that had to wait in line to register. The best compliment we can get is if someone comes back to Insight Summit. The event has doubled every year since it began, and a fair amount of attendees come back year after year.”

Sources: Qualtrics (2014); interviews in March 2017 with Kortney Osborne and Julia Giona from Qualtrics

An introduction to research in tourism and hospitality

The focus of market research is on the analysis of markets (Kinnear et al, 1993), and it is a critical marketing function. Unfortunately, in the tourism and hospitality sector, many smaller organizations feel that ‘real’ market research is a costly and time-consuming luxury only available to large companies that have professional research staff, sophisticated computers, and almost unlimited budgets. Other organizations see market research as something to be undertaken when a major event is about to occur – the introduction of a new product, the acquisition of a new property, or a change in target markets. Its value at these junctures is recognized, but its ability to contribute to an organization’s success on a day-to-day basis is often overlooked. Another common problem in the tourism industry is that organizations are not making full use of the information that already exists and is easily accessed. Sometimes information is available and studies are done, but the results are either ignored or not fully considered in the final decision-making process. The opening *Spotlight* profiles a technology company, Qualtrics, who understand the significance of doing research in order to provide attendees with the best possible experience during its annual summit in Utah.

Applied research in tourism and hospitality can be grouped into eight categories: research on consumers; research on products and services; research on pricing; research on place and distribution; research on promotion; research on competition; research on the operating environment; and research on a destination. Table 6.1 lists some of the typical research programs undertaken within these categories.