

Creativity



Photo courtesy of Hot On Broadway

Innovation

Magically Turn The Ordinary Into Extraordinary

A fresh and exciting way to keep your employees engaged and make the company's message stick is to incorporate entertainment in your corporate event. Here the cast of Hot On Broadway entertains attendees at the Bayer Global Leadership Conference.

By Diana Rowe

Which way do you lean? Are you right-brained or left-brained? Marketeers sometimes use the quasi-scientific theory that right-brained people interpret information visually and use their intuitive powers in a creative manner whereas left-brained people are more comfortable processing the written and spoken word in a more logical manner.

If you tend to lean to the left and could use a healthy dose of creativity when planning your meetings, events and conferences, there are many excellent resources to help you turn the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Lasting Impression

Steve Thomas, chairman-elect and vice chair of finance of the International Association of Corporate Entertainment Producers (IACEP), said, "Incorporating entertainment into an event is often the best way to make a lasting impression, but it is also the most challenging for planners who aren't from the theatrical world."

Thomas recommended enlisting the aid of corporate entertainment industry leaders. "With more than 100 members, IACEP is a professional association of entertainment producers and suppliers that can ride

to the planner's rescue and offer a handful of tactics, trends and tips on managing the maze of entertainment. We add creativity and innovation to your event, and we can work within most budgets."

Thomas is also the managing director of East Coast Entertainment, an Atlanta, GA-based company that specializes in large-scale corporate entertainment. A former performer, Thomas primarily produces shows, including major corporate and charity events throughout the U.S. and six foreign countries.

"Corporate events can leave a powerful and lasting impression by of-

fering an immediate live experience," said Thomas. "Even when attendance is required, companies still have to compete for their employees' attention, and let's face it — a meeting is about driving home the corporate message. Whether the goal is to honor the sales team, kick-off a new product or conduct board meetings, the bottom line is that attendees are becoming more entertainment-savvy and more demanding, requiring more interactive entertainment."

The Big Reveal

Using proven Broadway techniques can give shows an added "wow" factor. But when a planner's budget, time constraints or lack of space are not sufficient to recreate an authentic Broadway setting, Thomas recommends downscaling and focusing on what you do have. The big reveal is the most basic and dramatic Broadway technique available to planners.

Thomas explained, "We've all seen it. The lights go down. The center stage is blacked out, and then voilà! the show appears before our very eyes. The element of surprise, also known as the 'big reveal,' has the power to impact your audience and even send a message if used properly. And, the good news is that the surprise doesn't need a lot of space. In the center stage, planners can highlight the grand finale, an act, a band or even a special corporate guest.

Other dramatic methods of unveiling the surprise include hiding the "act" with smoke and then fanning the smoke away while turning up the lights for the reveal, or dropping a curtain attached to a center point in the stage that, with a touch of a button, falls to reveal what's on stage. Known as a "Kabuki drop" in Broadway parlance, it also can be accomplished manually by a stage hand. Either way, the effect is amazing and memorable.

"The key is to take the ordinary

and see the extraordinary," said Thomas. "The planner often becomes overwhelmed by the big picture of the entire event, and instead of creating extraordinary moments, she overpowers the content. Take a segment of the event and make it stand out."

Thomas recently produced an event for a group of 300 railroad industry executives at Turner Field, the home of the MLB Atlanta Braves. They entered the stadium through the back entrance, walked through the players' tunnel to the darkened field.

"When the lights came on," recalled Thomas, "they were in the middle of a marching band on a ma-



Jeffrey Finn
President and Founder
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jeor-league baseball field. We set up dinner on the infield, along with extreme sports from motorcycles performing in balls of death, Cirque du Soleil acts, BMX bicycles, extreme trampoline acts, and even a couple of Braves ballplayers pitching and hitting. As I was leaving the program, I looked back to see about four guys running around the outfield catching imaginary balls. The big reveal, in this case, turned into a big thrill."

Planners should not get too hung up on theme, according to Thomas, but if you have to stick to a theme, do it with visuals, not content. For an Atlanta event, Thomas' client selected a "Gone with the Wind" theme. The attendees were all fitted with period ballgowns and Civil War uniforms.

The cocktail party featured music from the era as well as a horse and carriage at the entrance. However, for the finale, the planner selected dance music to fit the demographics of her group.

Raising The Bar

"Meeting planners have the near impossible challenge of always raising the bar higher by finding fresh and exciting ideas for corporate events year after year. As a theme, Broadway is immediately synonymous with luxury, and represents the very best in live performance and entertainment,"

said Jeffrey Finn, a Tony Award-nominated Broadway produc-

er who in 1992, launched Hot On Broadway, a corporate division of his production company, to provide premium entertainment for corporate groups. Finn describes his productions as unique, as they bring current Broadway performers to corporate events. Finn added, "No two events of ours are the same, as we tailor each production to fit the message, theme and audience of the event."

In addition to a recent event for Meeting Professionals International, (MPI), Hot On Broadway has created events for such companies as General Electric, Bayer, Toyota, Fidelity Investments, Harrah's, The Ritz-Carlton Hotels and Disney.

Finn also advises planners to "think big, then reach out to industry professionals to make your vision a reality." He said that when speaking to meeting planners, "they tend to think that Broadway is out of their price range because they immediately think of full-blown spectaculars. While we have produced many of those type of productions, we also have provided one or two performers singing solos and duets that Broadway is so famous

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for, which elates the planner because now Broadway is within their reach.”

In addition, Finn reminds planners that the theme should encompass the entire venue. “From the minute your attendees arrive, they should enter a space that is unlike any other — not just a typical corporate meeting stage. For example, take the frequently overlooked entryways and hallways that your attendees will walk through before reaching the venue — how can they be decorated (with audio-visual elements) to add dimension to your theme?”

Hot On Broadway customizes a playbill or program with the client’s logo, welcome letter from the CEO, dinner menu and other corporate information. Finn said, “It becomes a fun take-away for the attendees, but more important, it is another delivery method for the message of the event.”

Finally, Finn advocates thorough research. Planners must do their homework. They’ll know their audience well by answering these questions: What are the demographics of the attendees? What are their interests, and what initiatives have they just completed? What is their corporate philosophy and how are they marketing themselves? Finn suggests that answering these questions “leads directly to an organic entertainment experience.”

Celebrity Entertainment

Another way to raise the bar higher is to engage celebrity entertainment for kickoff or final night galas. Kristen Leoce often uses live musical talent and celebrities to brand her company’s events. Leoce is the event marketing manager for NYC-based *Sports Illustrated* (SI) magazine, a brand of Time Inc., a Time Warner company.

Leoce said, “My goal is to create meeting programs, entertainment events and venues that focus on reinforcing our brand message through partnerships and events with our different advertisers. To do so, we are constantly pushing the envelope with good talent, and new and innovative partner integration. However, it’s important to cut through the clutter of a major event to ensure the attendees feel as though

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Jef Hernandez
Creative Director
ME Productions
Pembroke Park, FL

they are the real highlight.”

Leoce hired Pembroke Park, FL-based ME Productions to help her create a fiery, chic club theme for her 600 guests during a Miami NASCAR Racing Weekend. The popular South Beach nightclub venue The Fifth was transformed into “Club SI.” SI’s invitation list included NASCAR partners, Ford Motor executives, SI advertisers and partners, and local celebrities. Leoce said that inviting celebrities, such as the band Wallflowers and NASCAR drivers, escalates the wow factor by offering guests one-on-one interaction. Leoce explained, “Our demographic is always quite diverse, but we have to concentrate on throwing a cool party with an effective corporate message that includes an interactive experience. Branding is an important tool, and we constantly have to think outside the box to up the ante of each event. Yet I can’t be afraid to fail. Often the best things

you learn from an event are things that went wrong. Fortunately, this SI event was a winner.”

Jef Hernandez, creative director for ME Productions, said his team created unique props, furnishings and themed décor that playfully displayed company logos and insignias while transforming the Miami venue into a themed and glamorous environment.

“SI had a heavy roster with sports celebrities,” said Hernandez. “Yet our challenge was make a NASCAR event classy enough to fit the brand of SI. In order to do so, you have to let go of the fear of failure and get to a place where you can have an experience that is out of the ordinary, a Broadway classic, if you will.”

Four Ford production vehicles were suspended on ramps at the entrance of the SI event, and the building was appointed with “Club SI” custom logo signage. All VIPs were photographed in front of a photo wall adorned with sponsor and SI logos. A “Club SI” ice sculpture was suspended from the ceiling, and branded luminaries were placed around the room. The Miami Heat Dancers sported SI logo jerseys.

During NASCAR week, ME Productions also created, planned and implemented events for client GMR Marketing, Miller Brewing Company’s alliance marketing agency.

“These particular Miller events are built around consumer and incentive trips,” said Scott Knueppel, supervisor of production and entertainment for the Milwaukee, WI-based GMR. “For our type of industry, incorporating the thrill of NASCAR events is often the closest our guests get to one of these races. The energy level is high, and it’s up to us to outdo last year’s event.”

Knueppel added, “Even though it’s a corporate event, with the added appearances of the NASCAR celebrity drivers, it is as exciting to our guests as attending a sold-out Broadway show.”

More than 400 guests passed by Miller's official race car, which was positioned outside the "Miami Lites" event to reinforce the brand message. ME Productions replaced more than 90 percent of the club's furnishings with illuminated, branded furniture groupings. Flat-screen monitors continuously played multimedia clips from NASCAR and Miller Lite commercials.

ME's Hernandez added, "Creativity won't work when it's stifled. Instead, we want to create an experience that is out of the ordinary that will bring out the inner child, yet still achieve the objectives of the client. Then we can tone it down, if necessary. Incorporating NASCAR might make sense, but it was just as important to create something different in order to reach the seasoned savvy audience who've 'been there, done that.'"

Creative And Charitable

Amy McDaniel, senior vice president of Remington, a Dallas, TX-based hotel management company, used her creative powers to come up with a winning combination for a private, invitation-only event she arranges during the Americas Lodging Event Summit (ALIS). McDaniel's initial goal was to create a unique event that would help strengthen business relationships and entertain their top clients. At the time, she considered what was hot and appealing to her predominantly male audience. McDaniel decided to focus on the popularity of poker as a fundraising event as opposed to the overplayed casino theme most events host. She explained, "We knew bringing celebrities in would bring massive appeal, yet we also wanted to add depth

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Amy McDaniel
Senior Vice President
Remington
Dallas, TX

and make it a charity event to benefit the Fallen Heroes Fund, the not-for-profit organization that supports the men and women of the Armed Forces and their families." Remington sought out Phil Gordon, the host of the popular series "Celebrity Poker Showdown," who signed on as emcee of the event.

McDaniel wanted the poker event to be close to the conference and remain onsite at the host hotel of the ALIS. Together, they came up with an innovative alternative: They set up

a 5,000-square-foot tent. Once the doors open, the event is a full-blown poker challenge, said McDaniel, with nine players at each of the 12 to 18 tables. Each place setting includes a pair of dark glasses, fact sheet and rules, poker cheat sheet and a collector coin emblazoned with the company logo.

Today, after five highly successful events, McDaniel noted, "Our event works because we stay true to our company. Sure, we could make this one huge production and double our attendance by using Broadway show techniques, but we're successful because we stay true to the boutique feel we're known for."

McDaniel added, "Many guests don't play, but they love to watch right down to the final table. Gordon is a tremendous contributor to our event, with his charm and knowledge of the game. His charitable and gracious spirit makes the event far greater than it would be without him. Our event is as outstanding as it is lighthearted. Gordon will even offer to play a hand for a guest — if they make a donation to the charity."



More than 300 railroad industry executives were treated to a big thrill at an event staged by East Coast Entertainment. The attendees dined with ballplayers on Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves, surrounded by a marching band, extreme sports demos, BMX biking stunts, Cirque du Soleil acts and more.

Photo courtesy of East Coast Entertainment