



nem!ce – defined, designed, delivered....

The first week of April MPI New England held the annual New England Meeting Industry Conference & Exhibition, known as nem!ce for the 23rd year. Meeting Professionals International is a global trade association with 24,000 members internationally comprised of corporate, association and independent planners as well as suppliers. MPI New England is the 8th largest chapter in the international association with an average of 750 members. nem!ce is the 3rd largest trade show and educational conference in the global MPI community, the only one planned and executed by a volunteer committee and small chapter staff.

DEFINED

Going into the 23rd year of nem!ce chapter leadership recognized that changes needed to be made. Historically the event was a one day conference with 6 education sessions and an opening keynote. nem!ce has been the New England chapter of MPI's largest revenue generator for years. The success and popularity of the conference appeared to be in decline. Chapter membership expressed that the event was not meeting their needs for education, business development and networking.

DESIGNED

The MPI New England Board of Directors, comprised of volunteer New England industry leaders, recognized that it was time to reinvent the conference. An extensive survey was distributed to chapter membership soliciting input prior to beginning conference design. Under the leadership of Karen King, Principal of meeting strategists llc, the committee applied strategic planning practices utilized in King's firm. With these priorities in mind new conference architecture was developed. The volunteer nem!ce committee defined and prioritized what was most important to our membership. The key take-a-ways, voiced by membership, were advanced level education, business development and networking opportunities.

To refresh the event's appeal it was rebranded, giving the conference a fresh look and feel. An updated marketing communication plan included web 2.0 tools for the first time such as a LinkedIn home page and twitter account. These supported traditional direct mail and emails blasts.

A variety of levels of education were built into the program, expanding the conference from one day to two, and from 6 educational sessions to 24 with 6 defined tracks. Responding to requests from more senior professionals MPI Foundation Platinum level speakers like Teri Breining, past MPI Chairwoman, augmented our education.

2 General Sessions were added; inspirational and industry specific. Grace Andrews, Chief Sparkplug, Ignite, was recruited because the committee knew it was essential to deliver a powerful message. Bruce MacMillan, CEO of Meeting Professionals International, was approached to close the conference as one of the most influential industry leaders in this politically charged economic climate.

A complimentary community service activity, designed to benefit the Greater Boston Food Bank, was added. The program was in support of the Bill Emerson Act which releases hospitality facilities from liability associated with food donations from hosted events. Food was made and donated to the Greater Boston Food Bank for distribution to several New England shelters and Boston School system.

With the intention of driving traffic to the exhibit floor the committee designed the general session theater within the trade show floor. Knowing the community demanded to be able to effectively conduct business the trade show floor was designed to facilitate business and networking discussions.

Networking was to be prominently featured throughout the program. Opportunities for networking included Club nem!ce, an event held Sunday night, prior to the first full day of the event, to allow planners and sponsors to mingle in a relaxed social setting. On Monday evening the exhibit floor was opened with a first time trade show reception to kick off the expo hours.

DELIVERED

Although the dark clouds were forming during the months of planning and reinventing, no one anticipated the extent of the impact of the economic meltdown or the "AIG Effect" on nem!ce. We quickly became an industry under attack. Industry partners were losing jobs at record rates, negating survey results of 18 months ago, T&E and professional education budgets were slashed dramatically, all of which threatened to impact nem!ce attendance.

One month out registrations were significantly lagging. Chapter leadership realized that our financial goals were not going to be met and it became clear that very difficult decisions had to be made. Attendance and "buzz" had to be weighed against revenue; long term vs. short term decisions for the well being of the conference. The committee responded by leveraging our relationships with partner suppliers (sponsors).

While attempting to maintain the integrity of the newly designed conference, but mitigate damages extensive renegotiations began. The three primary partners supporting the event, our host facility Seaport Hotel and Seaport World Trade Center, Projections AV and Freeman Decorating were all approached to assist in mitigating potential damages. A renegotiated food and beverage minimum with our host sponsor helped our bottom line as did moving the general sessions into an auditorium to save the cost of AV and building out a theater on the exhibit floor. A renegotiated contract with Freeman also helped minimize cost of carpeting the expo floor. The net reduction in costs resulting from this exercise exceeded \$75,000.00.

To drive attendance and traffic a lottery was created for the exhibitors which delivered complimentary passes to their best clients. Free passes were distributed resulting in 100 planners attending the event at no charge. This decision resulted in a loss of \$30,000.00 in potential revenue to the chapter, but increased planner traffic, which is critical to the success and ROI of the supplier sponsors.

When planning began, the attendance goal was to have 700 planners and 240 booths. The financial goals driving the redesign were to turn a profit and to reduce the chapter's financial reliance on nem!ce. As months passed and the economic challenges continued the committee prepared for much lower attendance resulting in a financial goal to break even. Creative pricing options, including one day packages allowing greater attendance, were offered. 85-90% of nem!ce registrations came in the final two weeks, making planning decisions challenging.

The goal to break even was met and the conference was well received by those who attended. Despite all of the obstacles, overall messaging delivered was timely, the education was outstanding, and the number of networking opportunities provided exceeded those delivered in years past. Final attendance numbers were 305 qualified planners and 500 exhibitors/180 booths. nem!ce generated the best press coverage in its history, covered by meetingsnet.com, the #nemice Twitter group generated a lot of buzz about the event, and the blogging community has continued to be very interested in our story. Bruce MacMillan and other industry experts have devoted space in their blogs about their experience at the "new" nem!ce.

We truly delivered a reinvented nem!ce in spite of all of the economic challenges. After all the compromises that had to be made, the final result was the cancellation of just one of the 24 educational sessions. Evaluations support that the education delivered met the needs of the membership. Continuing the improvements begun in 2009 is the top priority of the New England chapter. Planning for nem!ce 2010 has begun; an exhibitor/sponsor focus group has been conducted. Feedback from this valuable group of partners will be implemented in 2010. The opportunity to continue building a world class conference on the foundation of nem!ce 2009 has the volunteers and staff energized and ready to go!

Written by:

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