

Focus on the Why: How Branding Principles Can Guide Your Event Design.



MEETINGS & EVENTS

Focus on the Why: How Branding Principles Can Guide Your Event Design.

Even with budgets remaining constrained in many parts of the globe, the attendee experience is coming into focus in a major way. The meeting planner's role continues to shift well beyond meeting logistics, and is increasingly focused on delivering a quality experience for attendees. New demands to deliver on complex meeting plans, leverage technology innovations, and find unique venues require that meeting planners think outside the box and think strategically to deliver an exciting and engaging experience.

In the 2018 Global Meetings Forecast, when asked how they would allocate resources if budgets were to increase, the meeting planners across almost all regions chose production and content as their preferred area of investment. Similarly, when asked about the most compelling reason to use mobile apps, attendee engagement topped the list. These responses speak to the importance survey respondents and interview participants have placed on attendee engagement and experience for 2018.

It is sometimes easy for planners to get wrapped up in the “what” of the event—planning the perfect evening function, selecting just the right menu, or creating a high-energy general session. While this part of the planning is essential, it is also important to take a step back from the details to first understand the “why” that will guide all the event design decisions. This paper will explore how to focus on the “why” and use an outcome-based approach to design an effective and memorable event.



WHAT IS A WHY?

In branding exercises, marketing professionals often work to define and communicate their brand's essence—the brand promise, the brand mantra—the “one thing” that communicates the emotional and functional attributes of the brand. These few, select words or brief statements are the “Why” of the brand, and should encapsulate not what it does, but how it will make its consumers feel. This emotional connection is apparent in some of the most famous global brands.

- **Harley Davidson™** wants their brand to fulfill the personal dreams of freedom for their riders—to evoke feelings of independence, authenticity and the passion for being on the open road.¹
- **For Crayola™** their brand essence is all about evoking feelings of curiosity—about freeing the “what if?” and unleashing the originality in every child.²

In both examples, the product function is not the heart of the message, but rather the brand focuses on the outcome the product will help the consumer achieve.

We can think about event design in much the same way. The first step for any event should be establishing the desired outcomes for the organization as well as for the participants. Most simply, Why are you having this event? Defining your event's why—the “one thing” that it should accomplish and how it should make your attendees feel—will serve as your guide post through every aspect of the event planning process. Below we consider 3 key steps to identify and apply the “why” of your event to ensure the experience is focused, meaningful, and consistently delivered across all event touchpoints.



STEP 1:

Identify the Desired Outcomes — Why are you having this event?

The first thing that should happen before any event planner or marketing owner starts thinking about menus or décor is to engage stakeholders in a conversation about desired outcomes.

A good exercise is to first gather all the objectives of the event, across all event stakeholders, and define the behavior change this event will impact. In as few words as possible, describe the measurable goals as well as the intangible goals of the event. Then choose your top 1 or 2 outcomes that will be priority.

Examples of “whys” include:



Build customer loyalty



Improve new product knowledge



Increase sales by 20%



Inspire participants to engage



STEP 2:

Get to Know Your Participants — How do you want them to feel?

Now that you have clearly articulated the goals of your event, you're ready to plan, right? Not yet. To deliver your "why" you need to understand how your attendees will connect with it.

Take a deeper look at your attendees and what will make them engage or disengage. Just as brands need to understand the needs and wants of their target audiences, event designers should consider all their constituents, from participants to sponsors/exhibitors to media.

You likely have insight into basic demographic information from the registration process. But that is only one key piece. Using your defined event essence as your guide post, dig deeper into the emotional, creative aspects of the event. What do you want attendees to feel? What feelings do you need to overcome? What would make this a transformational experience? In branding, marketers refer to this as the emotional attributes of the brand. A few exercises can help you define and visualize the emotional attributes of your event.



Attendee Personas Put yourself in their shoes and really try to understand why they will come to your event and what their personal drivers are that will help them (and you) achieve the desired outcomes. Some common event personas are The Knowledge Seeker, The Tech-Savvy Networker, The Inspiration Seeker, The Social Butterfly, The Reluctant Attendee and The Brand Fanatic. More information on these attendee profiles can be found in the whitepaper [Understanding Your Event Attendees: Using Personas for Event Design](#).



Mood Boards To inspire the creative elements of your event, create a visual "mood board." Gather your stakeholders and provide visual samples for them to consider—colors, sample room set ups, abstract images, popular culture, etc. Discuss what images best represent the style and vibe you want for your event. At the end of the exercise you should have a collage that can be used to guide event design decisions.



Word Sheets Gather your stakeholders and use word sheets to begin identifying how they want attendees to feel. First, each person chooses 10 words from their own unique word lists—emotive words like curious, powerful, thankful, trusted, etc. Then divide the group into smaller groups and continue to narrow the word choices until a consensus is reached. You may be surprised at what becomes important, and you should allow time for discussion. This same exercise can also be used to first identify current attendee feelings about an event experience and then how you want those feelings to change.



Pre-Event Survey If you truly want to understand the needs of attendees, ask them. Consider a pre-event survey to better understand attendee preferences and personalize the experience.

STEP 3:

Choose the Functional Attributes — What will bring the experience to life?

In the final step, we come full circle back to your event essence and focus on delivering the “why” in ways that meet the needs of the attendees. What are the basics that you need to meet your objectives? What are the “wow” elements that create the emotion of your event and make it memorable to your audience? The functional attributes of a product ensure the brand essence is believable and trusted by the buyer. The functional aspects of your event—from invitation to registration to onsite experience—are the elements that will deliver a transformational experience that will exceed attendee expectations.



PRE-EVENT

The invitation is the first opportunity to set the stage for attendees—setting expectations, articulating values, and generating interest. Refer to your mood board and key emotional attributes to ensure theming and design are on target for each communication leading up to the event. Registration is where attendees start to make choices that will define their experience. Use your event personas to guide survey questions and personalize the process. Do you have enough breakout choices to encourage the Reluctant Attendee? Can the Tech Savvy Networker gain access to the mobile app to start planning onsite connections? How these details are captured impact attendee perceptions and confidence in the event.



ONSITE

From staging and production to breakouts and speakers, this is where it all comes together and each detail matters. Consider what will make this event extraordinary—can't buy experiences, localized experiences, inspirational content and speakers that bring your event essence to life. Consistency is key. Ensure each touchpoint is delivering on expectations and desired outcomes. Use your event essence as a “home base” for decision-making and prioritization. If one stakeholder wants a formal gala, but another is insisting on a casual food truck dinner, always come back to the “why” of your event to support the decision.



POST-EVENT

Every event large and small should include planned and purposeful communication. Ongoing engagement with attendees can reinforce meeting content and encourage action. Ensure incentive trip participants keep the motivation and momentum going to earn again. Continuous education after a product launch will help keep features and benefits top of mind. Finally, post-event surveys will determine if you achieved the desired outcomes.

Conclusion

While these steps to uncover the “why” of your event may seem straightforward, remember that any type of shift in thinking takes practice. Event professionals are often on very tight timelines with an overwhelming number of details to manage, so adding work upfront may feel impossible at first. Consider starting with a few key events to find out what process works best for your organization. Ultimately, approaching your events more strategically will yield a better experience for your participants and better outcomes for your business.

¹ <https://www.harley-davidson.com/us/en/about-us/company.html>
² <http://www.crayola.com/about-us/company/brand-essence.aspx>

We Know Meetings

American Express Meetings & Events helps transform your meetings investment, working with you to create and implement a program that's right for you, bringing comprehensive, flexible solutions, actionable insight, and the expertise to design and deliver effective, exciting experiences for your attendees. We work with you side-by-side, finding opportunities to meet your specific business objectives – using meetings to keep your company a step ahead. Responsible for more than 70,000 meetings annually, we know meetings. Our scalable solutions range from sourcing and planning to reconciliation and reporting. We can assist you end-to-end, or at any point in the meetings and event process. Our expertise is comprehensive—including in-person, digital and hybrid solutions. As your needs grow, we grow with you. American Express Meetings & Events provides continuous insights that give you new visibility into your meetings program—helping to make your meetings program a driver of your organization's success.

amexglobalbusinesstravel.com/meetings-and-events



MEETINGS & EVENTS

This document and its contents are for marketing and general information purposes only. All information and materials contained in this document are protected by copyright laws, and may not be reproduced, republished, distributed, transmitted, displayed, broadcast or otherwise exploited in any manner without the express prior written permission of American Express Global Business Travel (GBT). You may use this document and its content for your own personal and non-commercial use only, without altering or removing any trademark, copyright or other notice from such document.

GBT expressly disclaims any and all warranties, express or implied, including without limitation warranty of completeness, suitability, accuracy, reliability, merchantability or the fitness for a particular purpose regarding this document or its contents. Any reliance or use of the information is therefore strictly at your own risk. In no event shall GBT be liable for any direct, indirect, incidental, consequential or punitive loss or damages of any kind arising out of or in connection with the use of this document or its contents.

"American Express Meetings & Events" is a service provided by American Express Global Business Travel (GBT). GBT is a joint venture that is not wholly owned by American Express Company or any of its subsidiaries (American Express). "American Express Global Business Travel," "American Express" and the American Express logo are trademarks of American Express and are used under limited license.