

ASSOCIATIONS TURN TO CONTRACTORS FOR LATEST LEAD RETREIVAL TECHNOLOGY

By Chris Williams

Most association executives don't have the time or in-house expertise to develop, let alone keep up with, the latest in technologies that might benefit their organization. This fact of life is especially true when it comes to putting on the annual meeting or trade show.

Having contractors handle work driven by new technology is a good way for association staff to focus on areas deemed more important or to deal with work only they can do. With all the challenges facing those responsible for an event's success, new technology can be a welcome resource by providing answers to sometimes complex or time-consuming challenges.

"I look for innovation from my contractors," says Pete Erickson, president of Hall Erickson, Inc. "They need to be always looking for what's next. I look for these elements more so than cost-effectiveness. This, in congruence with outsourcing, adds to the contractor's overall value and helps association organizers."

One new development is the concept of taking a full-circle approach to handling exhibitor leads. For example, it is now possible to offer services before, during, and after the show. The convenience and reliability of this approach greatly eases a lot of the workload from everyone involved in a show, organizers included.

Each year, exhibitors demand more from the shows they participate in: better exposure, better sales leads, and a better return on their investment. Thus, associations are continually looking for new ways to help them get more out of their show experience.

New high-tech and web-based technologies can take care of all an exhibitor's concerns at once. They can now be provided a self-serve system to ease their own lead management. With a few mouse clicks, they can select a list and compose and deliver a professional looking HTML broadcast email or postcard mailing. The whole process takes less than five minutes. This is a great time and money saver for busy exhibitors on a tight budget. Thus, the association has less of an overall workload burden when dealing with exhibitors.

This type of service foretells a future in which outside contractors streamline many of the necessary tasks involved in running a successful meeting and/or trade show for an association. Technology certainly will continue to advance and provide solutions to make future events less complicated and more profitable for associations and show organizers.

Capitalizing on Leads

Contractors are more willing and often more capable of investing the manpower and financial resources in the sometimes lengthy and expensive process of developing new technologies, much of which is now cherished by associations.

New technology – provided by outside contractors – in lead-retrieval systems that treat lead management as a complete, 360-degree package, helps make an entire show more valuable and more attractive to exhibitors. Other advances in technology already have made association meetings and trade shows easier and more effective for attendees while at the same time keeping the interest and involvement of the exhibitors.

A successful show is measured not by how many leads were taken by exhibitors, but rather by the number of leads they were able to convert to sales. Web-based services also help the cause with websites that house all the leads captured at a show. No file uploading is required. Leads are posted online for exhibitors. From there they can take advantage of a variety of lead follow up services such as broadcast emailing and postcard mail fulfillment.

Of course, none of the rewards from using contractor services and products would be recognizable without progressive use of technology. It seems as though the logical progression is to embrace all there is to offer technology-wise, as well as of services provided. Using the latest in lead-retrieval and registration, and combining it with solid service from a trusted contractor can be the one-two punch that spares the association staff and leaves them the resources to address other issues. I believe this approach is a recipe for success.

NRA Case Study

At the 2006 National Restaurant Association (NRA) show, new advancements in products and services were present and made a lasting impression. Using an advanced group of technologies in conjunction with all other aspects of running an expo freed up time for show organizers to concentrate on developing ways to keep the show sharp and keep exhibitors coming back. As a result, The NRA saw a 6% growth increase in both exhibitors and square footage from 2005 to 2006.

Another potential benefit to show organizers is that they can worry less about being on top of the latest technology themselves. With a contractor taking on all the lead-retrieval and registration responsibilities of an entire expo, association organizers don't have to worry about keeping track of every new development that comes along. The contractor providing these services will have any issues or potential benefits already assessed and covered. This will give organizers much more peace of mind.

The benefits of contractor-supplied technologies will go on long after organizers have packed their bags and begun planning next year's expos. Their exhibitors will be able to follow up on leads so easily that it's almost guaranteed that they'll want to come back to an association's show time after time.

“As an association manager, registration is a crucial but difficult function,” says Patti Beese, Director, Operations and Services for the NRA. “It’s really a marketing function; there is so much information to be had and to be used. New technology really comes in handy in the analyzing of demographics. Exhibitors also use this data to market to their audience.”

For an organizer such as Beese, having the latest products and services at-hand helps her win exhibitor satisfaction. “The partnership between contractors and association managers is vital in making shows a success. With these relationships, association managers can continue to offer these same great services that exhibitors use as *the* tool to maximize their ROI.”

Beese also said, “We’ve partially outsourced services for some time. Before signing with our current contractor in 2000 we handled registration and lead retrieval in-house, but did so using a third party's software. We also used the same third party to handle our onsite registration. Association managers spend much more time on registration than on lead-retrieval. Once NRA outsourced all these responsibilities it became evident that it was a monumental step forward. It is such an involved process that streamlining it was necessary to keep costs down for exhibitors and keep association managers’ involvement to a minimum.”

The concept of offering such comprehensive services and implementing them with the latest in technology is a hot-button issue. Many organizers will seek out these elements at any cost. While it may seem passé to laud every new technology that comes our way, when advancements in high-tech systems are used strategically and in a way that they can tackle any issue from any angle, it becomes hard to dispute the fact that technology is truly beneficial.

Beese adds, “The evolution of lead-retrieval products, for example, is evident in the fact that units are continually getting smaller. It’s very important to address this facet and stay on top of it.”

“Nothing is 100 percent foolproof, but companies should always keep units easy to use and easily compatible to any situation. For instance, if an exhibitor has a booth space without an electrical connection there should be a wireless solution. I’m also impressed with the use of USB flash disk drives for storing data.” She notes that this is evidence that technological advancement has an impact on the entire exposition experience.

These factors also are reflected in the demeanor of exhibitors. Exhibitors need to be able to qualify leads quickly and extensively and get them back to the home office, often times on a daily basis. Portable USB memory drives make this process easy. Exhibitors can remove the drive any time during the show to access their lead file electronically.

Jason Gough, of Magnuson Industries, who exhibited at the 2006 NRA show, expressed prior concern regarding the reliability of lead-retrieval systems. “It’s never good if lead-

retrieval devices don't work, and I've had them break on me." "At the NRA show we had a CompuLEAD II unit and it was far better than any handheld scanner because all you had to do was drop the card in and it was done."

The future appears bright and promising for associations and their relationships with outside contractors. Contractors will keep working long and hard to bring new technologies into the marketplace. At the same time, more and more association executives are seeing the value of using contractors who can utilize advances in technology to address problems and unique challenges that all factions on the tradeshow floor face.

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