



CHASING EXECUTION OVER STRATEGY:



HOW ONE ASSOCIATION STOPPED THE MADNESS AND TRANSFORMED THEIR ANNUAL CONFERENCE & EXPO

You see it all too often. A dedicated, hard-working team consistently in overdrive delivering on an ever-lengthening list of tactics that make the annual conference happen. Meanwhile, attendance trends are down and the local chapters feel increasingly like they are competing, not partnering. Everyone is working hard, but no one is aligned or engaged.

One national association with more than 60,000 individual members as well as 300 local chapters saw just these types of trends for their national conference and expo.

- Recent years had seen attendance fall below the historical average of 8,000 to 10,000
- Sessions had ballooned to more than 700
- Sponsorships suffered from turnover creating challenges for revenue predictability

Substantive change that would drive innovation was needed.

RMK EVENT AUDIT: THE SCOPE

Success would require a strategic perspective from a partner that would bring extensive best practice experience. RMK Productions was selected and began by gathering data in three areas:

- 1. People** – Using a balance of in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys RMK sought to identify the larger issues driving the trends around the event. The work included input from staff, board members, vendors, speakers, chapter leaders and attendees.
- 2. Financials** – Exploring both the revenue and expense sides of the equation, RMK conducted a thorough analysis of the event's finances and compared them to best practice.
- 3. Materials** – All electronic and hard copy materials were audited and scored as to their usefulness and appropriateness to the intended purpose as well as alignment with the brand.



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STRATEGIC WISDOM: THE FINDINGS

The overarching finding was that no one was ultimately responsible for the strategic vision and oversight of the conference and expo. Over time it had morphed into a disconnected set of objectives and teams trying to be all things to all attendees.

Rather than see the negatives, RMK reframed the findings to identify a range of opportunities for innovation, chiefly:

- Identification of a strategic owner who could communicate a clear strategic vision that would guide engagement and alignment across the entire organization as well as the conference execution team.
- Closer alignment of the conference locations to the needs and wants of attendees.
- Execution of new approaches and activities that would increase the personalization of attendees' experience while also increasing the "fun" factor.
- The use of newer technologies to facilitate marketing, registration, speaker management and on-site event communications and networking.
- More effective use of electronic materials as well as improved quality control for online and hard copy materials.
- Less quantity, more quality content, plus improved speaker abstract vetting and preparation.
- Ensuring content at the national conference was well-differentiated from that available regionally.
- Creating a better balance between sessions and networking opportunities.

INNOVATION THROUGH STRATEGIC EXECUTION

As a result the association was able to break down and prioritize a range of innovations based on their potential impact as well as available resources. As a next step after the audit, the association set a 3-part, 3-year, strategy to guide a comprehensive overhaul of the conference:

1. Value the conference as an essential tool for membership growth and retention over revenue generation.
2. Strongly align the location to the needs and wants of the attendees.
3. Reconstruct the look, feel and experience to appeal to millennials.





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IS IT WORKING?

Rather than attempt to do it all at once, the association created an incremental 3-year plan that breaks each major change effort into smaller, achievable steps. They are currently wrapping up year 2 of the 3-year plan – with one more month

before the second conference since the audit. To date the results are encouraging. Staff are more engaged and aligned and attendance and revenues are moving in the right direction.

LET'S LOOK SPECIFICALLY AT HOW THEY APPROACHED THE AREAS OF CONTENT AND AFFILIATE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS THE PLAN'S SCHEDULE.

CONTENT

YEAR ONE:

1. Reduce the number of sessions to 625
2. Add more rigor to the review process
3. Provide some general guidance on best practice for presenters

YEAR TWO:

1. Reduce the number of sessions to 575
2. Create an advisory board drawing from all conference constituents; significantly increase the rigor of the review process through training and recruitment of more reviewers
3. Provide training to support presenters/ improve their delivery
4. eliminate any pretense of sales in sessions

YEAR THREE:

1. Reduce the number of sessions to 500
2. Refine training for reviewers and presenters based on lessons learned in the 2nd year

Similar guidance was created to address each major area of the conference including: leadership, technology, attendee engagement and experience, marketing, exhibitor management and sponsorship involvement and benefit realization.

AFFILIATE/CHAPTERS RELATIONS

YEAR ONE:

1. Increase general levels of engagement with affiliates

YEAR TWO:

1. Increase the number of formal roles (committee positions, etc.) that facilitate affiliates working directly with the association on conference planning and execution

YEAR THREE:

1. Work to increase the number of affiliates holding their conference "within" the national conference
2. Ensure strong cross promotions are in place with affiliates
3. Position affiliates as national conference "co-hosts"

Turning a conference of this size around takes a long-term perspective complimented by a series of achievable short-term strategies. The audit provided the guidance needed to create and execute a new future. Importantly the improved conference experience appears to be paying dividends as we've seen an increase in new members as well as existing member retention.