

The Road Less Traveled: Event Industry Suppliers Move from Aggregation to Curation

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Event industry suppliers—general service contractors, marketing firms, and exhibit designers—are stepping out of their comfort zones to take advantage of the innovation that is sweeping over the industry. What might look like a desperate move by some companies to hitch their wagons to a star or an attempt to make up for the shortcomings of a flat industry is actually a smart business decision. A clear precedent for the trend comes from social media and the growing practice of content curation.

A hint that something was amiss came in the last half of 2009 when Maritz, a sales and marketing service company that relies on face-to-face events, introduced a suite of virtual offerings including their “Maritz LIVE initiative for delivering virtual events and experiences.” When Freeman, the 84-year-old general service contractor et. al. and kingpin of the trade show and live event industry, announced late in 2010 that it too would be offering virtual events as part of a new business unit, the door of opportunity flung wide open.

Virtual platforms aren’t the only star technologies being curated. MG Design recently rolled out its plans to offer its exhibitor clients RFID (radio frequency identification), QR (quick response)/Mobile, Augmented Reality, and social media integration with their exhibit design and fabrication services. The company offered attendees a hands-on look at the four technologies during Exhibitor 2011 in Las Vegas:

- Surveys and RFID tags matched visitors’ hot button issues with specific audio and video content
- QR codes were peppered throughout the exhibit leading visitors to information about MG’s products and services.
- An augmented reality demonstration helped attendees understand how to put interactive content in the hands of prospects without physically bringing more products and collateral to the booth.
- Social media tools illustrated the potential for making exhibit marketing programs viral.

The curation of services is different from the aggregation of services. In the old days, suppliers offered related services (domestic trucking, pop-up displays, freight forwarding) to their captive audience of customers, but the transactions were consummated between the sub-contractors and the exhibitors directly. In the curation model, related and seemingly “competitive” services are hand selected by industry suppliers who stay involved in the work stream—hence the suppliers’ value-added position with customers.

A May 2010 article on Mashable.com by Steve Rosenbaum highlights the importance of curation in content strategies. The same points validate the service curation strategies in the event industry. Rosenbaum quotes author and NYU Professor Clay Shirky; “Curation comes up when people realize that it isn’t just about information seeking, it’s also about synchronizing a community.” Even industry suppliers are saying as much when they explain their partial shift away from their core competencies with statements about their desires to utilize a “holistic approach to provide multiple value to customers or “lead [clients] to a more successful event experience.”

Rosenbaum brought up another point that is analogous to the emerging practice of event industry suppliers. “A lot of it is economic — doing more with less — and it has crossed every media industry,” explains Allen Weiner of [Gartner Group](#). “If you think about the tools you want to give an editor to make him or her more complete, you want to give them curation tools.” It could be “something they add to their own content. As more old media companies attempt to do more with less, publishing tools that allow this efficiency without demeaning the product quality ... [are] going to be very important.”

In the previous aggregation model, suppliers were not operating under any imperative to explain the outsourced service offerings to their customers. No one needed a sit down to understand the importance of shipping your exhibit to the show using a domestic carrier with no waiting time in the marshalling yard, an empty trailer at the ready during move-out, and a presence in the exhibitor service area. But with technology, there *is* a huge need to explain to clients the relevance, impact, and execution of the offerings. As Rosenbaum explains, “from a user perspective, well done curation is a huge value-add in a world where unfiltered signal overwhelms noise by an ever increasing factor.”

The Takeaway: For now, service curation may be a road less traveled. In the past it had been uncomfortable, financially risky, and a point of criticism for established companies to make a sea change in offerings. Social media has helped us understand how it can be done, where it fits into business models, and how to minimize the risk. What we may be seeing is the beginning of an assimilation of technology into the

backbone of the industry—great news for suppliers, exhibitors and attendees, and the platform developers who may see it as new sales channel.



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