



Event pitching: The role of design and creativity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research is to contribute towards a better understanding of the role of design and creativity in the pitch phase of an event bid. The paper does not seek to re-document the formal proposal process of preparing and bidding for an event but instead will look at an element within event bidding, the pitch to the client. Winning an event pitch is a crucial part of the events industry and is undertaken by most event management companies (EMC) or agencies. It is highly competitive. The material is based on qualitative research with key individuals working in the events industry and presents selective reflections upon the pitch process, the rationale and criteria for pitching and the extent to which they use creative thinking to win. Design and creativity are essential components that help make events memorable experiences, but as the paper demonstrates they also have a significant role in securing the event contract in the first place. In some cases elaborate and extreme design tactics are used to make a successful pitch.

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1. Introduction

Bidding for events is an everyday part of the events landscape for agencies working with corporate and public clients (Berridge, 2007) and has become an increasing part of strategic and policy initiatives by destinations to attract new business (Getz, 2004). A key element in the bidding process is the presentational 'pitch' to the client. The purpose of the research is to offer a better understanding of some of the key issues in event pitching and, in particular, some of the more creative approaches used in pitching. The majority of organisations operating in the events industry (in the UK) are typically small companies or agencies employing less than 20 permanent staff and pitching for new contracts is an essential part of their day to day operations. For those working in this commercial sector, pitching accounts from anywhere between 20 and 40% of their revenue whereas those working within the public sector it can account for 100%. An 'invitation to pitch' for a private, entertainment or celebration based event, is normally done by direct invitation from the client and often involves no more than 3 competitors making a 30–45 min presentational 'pitch' on ideas for the event. In the public sector and for many larger events the pitch is preceded by a pre-qualifying questionnaire or bidding stage, which mostly includes the formal documentation of a bid. From these bidders a short list is drawn and those on it are then invited to formally pitch for the event. A literature overview of event management texts ensues, followed by an explanation of methodology. Results from interviews with 9

people are then selectively discussed to highlight how agencies view pitching and the creative ideas they employ to be successful.

2. Literature review

The growing body of literature on event management has established that study by and large focuses upon planned events (Getz, 2008). Characteristically this study covers the key knowledge areas identified in the Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK) domains, namely administration, design, marketing, operations and risk (Silvers et al., 2006). In practical terms the literature discusses the planning, organisation and management of planned events and this is then further explored and discussed to give the reader a clear level of knowledge about what an event is, how to run one and the role events played in society (Allen et al., 2005; Shone and Parry, 2004; Raj et al., 2009; Van der Wagen and Carlos, 2005). There are a number of terms used within academia and industry in relation to securing contracts to run such events, and the boundaries or use of each is sometimes blurred or used as a catch-all to include all the processes involved in winning such a contract. For example, event contracts occur between individual agencies running events for corporate clients over a single day/evening event where there may be a highly creative or bespoke approach taken to the event concept. By comparison there are those events related to destination development where the event may be spread for several days and requires travel, accommodation, and leisure planning in addition to the event planning. Various terms that reappear time and again (Walters, 2008) to explain the process of securing an event contract are procurement, bidding, and pitching. In terms of research it is

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the latter that is the least developed of these and is the focus of this research but it might assist understanding to summarise the others first.

2.1. Procurement

Due to the significant role played by Visitor and Convention Bureaus, event 'procurement' is the most difficult to define because of the range of activities associated with procurement. It is most readily used within the conferences, conventions and meetings industry due to proliferation of corporate, association and public sector involvement and where there is a clear distinction between 'buyers' and 'suppliers' (Rogers, 2003). Procurement management is viewed as the 'sourcing, selection and contracting of the suppliers and vendors from whom goods and services will be procured using accurate solicitation materials and quality criterion' (Silvers, 2008). Procurement is widely interpreted and so difficult to clearly define, but nevertheless it can be seen as a business management function that ensures identification, sourcing, access and management of the external resources that an organisation needs or may need to fulfil its strategic objectives (Kidd, 2005). Procuring events falls within these two ideas through the activity of procurement planning and solicitation when event management companies are invited to bid for an event or an association or organisation issues a request for proposals. Visitor Convention Bureaus, for example, act in a procurement capacity by actively seeking and attracting events as part of the wider strategic policy of a region to attract more visitors (Rogers, 2003; Davidson and Cope, 2003) and public and other bodies use the appeal of events to enhance the image of a destination (Gold and Ward, 1994; Smith, 2001; Pugh, 2004; Boo and Busser, 2006).

2.2. Bidding

Event bidding tends to describe a series of activities that make up a 'bid' and, like procurement, can include 'request for proposals', and is often associated with major or mega events (sport, conferences or cultural events), ones that are a one-off or run infrequently, change location each time (Allen et al., 2005) and can also be classed as hallmark or mega events (Gratton et al., 2001). Although by no means exclusively the preserve of sports events, it is in this area that bidding has received the most attention and in which most academic work has been undertaken. This is not surprising since three of the world's largest events – the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup and the Commonwealth Games are sports events and the economic and social impact of hosting such an event is regarded as beneficial to the host. The bid process itself begins with the event owners inviting cities or countries to submit a proposal (Catherwood and Van Kirk, 1997; Emery, 2002; Masterman and Wood, 2004; Allen, 2002). An announcement is made either in public or by nomination to a number of associations. The event owner then establishes a set process for bidding and the timetable by which time-critical information or documentation must be lodged (Maralack and Lloyd, 2006; Getz, 1997). Guidelines and criteria for successful bidding are documented (Westerbeek et al., 2002; Swart and Urmilla, 2004) as are a number of commonly cited reasons why destinations and national governing bodies of sport bid to host sport events (Emery, 2001, 2002; Essex and Chalkley, 1998; Gold and Gold, 2008; Horte and Persson, 2003; Jago et al., 2003). Such events can be used to improve the brand identity of a city on a global scale (Walters, 2008). Because of this, competition to host such events is intense but does vary with the type of event, for example major junior events are mostly not the result of competitive bidding (Blake, 2005, 2008). The value of the events market is growing and further

highlights why there is such interest in securing the rights to run the:

The right to host an international event is now one of the most valuable prizes in sport. The 2007 Dubai International Sports Conference valued the market at US\$50 billion worldwide, while UK Sport estimates such events contribute £1.5 billion to the British economy each year (Walmsley, 2008).

It is predicted for the London 2012 Olympics that the event will generate an additional 8164 full-time equivalent jobs and add £1.936 billion to GDP between 2005 and 2016 (Blake, 2005). Major and mega events like this often involve public funding and the rights to host them are held by governing bodies that have a degree of accountability to the sport and their constituency. They are also likely to require considerable resources to organise and hence, carry a high degree of risk with them (Emery, 2002). For major events discussion and analysis of such bids tends to consider the rationale for bidding in the first place, the requirements of the bid, the strategy and policy of the bidding city and the impact a successful bid would have on the economic, social, political and cultural environment (Gratton and Henry, 2001). The bidding process itself is said to consist of five stages: the event objectives; the venue selection; strategic planning; feasibility study; bid procedure (Emery, 2002).

2.3. Pitching

Pitching can be referred to as the physical act of presenting the conceptual ideas of the bid to the client, in person, and the stage at which the competitive contract to run the events is won or lost (Berridge, 2007). It is a competitive process that is the chance for the EMC to verbally and visually 'pitch' their ideas to the client. The term 'pitch' is commonly used by industry professionals (especially those working with corporate clients) and is regarded as a key part in persuading the client to offer the contract for the event. However literature on events makes little or no reference to the term, tending instead to refer to the process as the presentation (Allen, 2002; Masterman and Wood, 2004), as an oral bid (Catherwood and Van Kirk, 1997) or simply regards the competitive process as culminating only in a written proposal (Monroe, 2006; Matthews, 2007). Therefore what tends to be studied is the framework or blueprint that establishes why an event is being considered, what the event idea is, how that can be conceptualised, and subsequently how it can be planned and organised. However what is often missing from these studies is the key stage of the process, the acquisition of the right to manage the event and, perhaps more importantly, how this is achieved. This knowledge on the 'pitch', both in terms of strategies used in pitching and the creative elements of the actual pitch, are relatively speaking under explored areas. This is despite the suggestion that in terms of winning a bid, creativity is regarded as one of the most important aspects (Matthews, 2007).

2.4. Event design and creativity

The role of design and creativity in event management is widely, albeit sometimes inconsistently, acknowledged in playing a central part in the planned event experience and this is especially the case for those events with a strong thematic, celebratory and entertainment element (Malouf, 1999; Sonder, 2004; Monroe, 2006; Matthews, 2007; Silvers, 2004; Allen et al., 2005). As the sources above suggest creating, conceptualising and designing an event requires a series of activities that must meet the client's perceptions of their event. Design can be used strategically to create an event proposal (Allen, 2002) and it can also be the

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