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OPUS

2020 STRAT CHATS

Candid conversations about evolving event strategies, trending topics and best practices for creating stronger experiences

**Building Best-in-Class
Event Teams, Internal
Capabilities and
External Excellence**

In this chat, we discuss building best-in-class event capabilities with:



TANIA WEIDICK
VP-Event Marketing



ANGIE SMITH
Head of Event and Field Marketing



JOHN HEIMAN
Director of Experiential Marketing



GARETT CARR
Global Auto Show and Events Manager



DENA LOWERY
Chief Operating Officer



The modern day event department is getting upgraded for 2020, as Corporate America invests in the people, processes and support products needed to create, deploy and measure better events.

For some companies, head count is changing. For others, new investments in data are getting prioritized. And for many, a commitment to tangible event strategy is driving all of it. One thing is for sure: 2020 events are going to be different than their 2019 predecessors—thanks to upgrades, tweaks, data-fueled changes and the people behind it all. In our latest installment of Strat Chats—the national roundtable discussions produced by Event Marketer and leading global event agency Opus—we assembled top brand marketers to discuss the state of the event department and how people and processes are evolving.

EM: How are you making your event portfolios stronger, and what trends are you seeing related to your overall portfolios?

TANIA WEIDICK: More and more, we're very focused on consulting with sales, even at the stage when we're determining what we're doing. It's not like in the days when I started, where you just plopped events into the market and rallied around them.

Now, it's so much more strategic, in terms of what your priorities are for your region, what your business priorities are and how we ladder that up to a corporate priority and make sure we're investing in the right places. And yes, Mark Hurd [Oracle's CEO] reviews our event portfolio, so it's completely at the level of the C Suite, which is fantastic.

ANGIE SMITH: All of our event strategy and portfolio is driven by product. We don't have a traditional sales team, so I'm super-aligned with the product and product marketing teams on their roadmap and what's going to be important.

We are working directly with our CMO and our product leadership team. I meet with them on a quarterly basis to see what's changed on the roadmap, because they know I have the best platform for them to be in front of our

customers, in market with events, to make a splash with what they're doing. It sort of becomes a forcing function for the product teams to have a platform to do something really cool.

JOHN HEIMAN: Several years ago, we had a portfolio of maybe 80 really large shows that we would go to. We went to them because we always went to them, and there wasn't alignment with sales. I challenged my internal clients to provide an ROI for each of these events, and they couldn't do it. So we scaled way, way back. Over time, we scaled back to about 10 or 12 big events, and shifted that investment into briefing centers, where we could have one-on-one conversations with our prospects, and to proprietary events.

And whether it's a briefing center or proprietary event, we're engaged hand in hand with the sales team, because they are the ones who have the relationship with the customer. So it's much more strategic, efficient and effective.

EM: With changes like those — an increased focus on alignment with sales, or more senior management visibility into what you're doing — how is your event department staffing changing?

SMITH: I actually faced a huge dilemma around this over

the past 12 months. Midway through fiscal 2019, we got a huge influx of event support money. And it was to go after a campaign in the IT market. I have event managers on our team, but the new campaign meant that I needed field marketing expertise, and that's different.

So we really had to transition my team's focus and build an agency model where we had to tap into a third party. A significant number of full-time people were added to my team through the agency model, because we weren't able to raise everyone's skillsets fast enough, and we needed to be super-agile and move quickly. And it's been really successful — so successful that our CMO has tapped other people in the business to say they should do what we did, tapping partners instead of hiring more full-time employees.

That's been my solution in the short-term, but it will also bleed into the long-term. The outsourcing model and contracting model are ways for us to augment our skillset, and it's a more sustainable way to do it.

WEIDICK: I have a team of about 80, and a few years ago we organized more like an in-house agency. I have an event operations team, and they develop expertise in their specific disciplines.

With cloud solutions, we are more focused on segmenting our audience and targeting all of the lines of business, beyond the IT audience. So it's important that we align [event] specialists by solutions areas, the same way that the sales teams and the product marketing and management teams are organized. They appreciate having somebody who can go a little deeper in each solutions portfolio and who can help with the content marketing and communications around that.

We're constantly trying to optimize, so shifting things around and providing opportunities for growth and development are a challenge. But as content becomes so much more important, we need to go deeper, and I

need more content strategy expertise to guide the whole experience of the event, for our attendees and for our internal customers as well. They're the first people we need to get on board.

GARETT CARR: We have a very small team of five people, but we outsource most of our work through our agencies, and we have some other teams that do some other events. But the skillset you need is the ability to talk to the sales team, the product team and the brand teams, and to be able to tease out the messages we're trying to say. Then you work with the agency to develop the story and create compelling, immersive stories out of that content.

People who have field experience are really good, too, because our dealers fund half of our auto shows. So we need to make sure we're partnering with them and delivering on their objectives, which are getting sales leads and getting people into showrooms. So we need a little bit of field, a little bit of product and a little bit of communications, and finding those people internally is hard. But we have some great agency partners, like Imagination, our global auto show agency that helps stitch everything together around the world, and we can share content, stories and ideas around the world.

So for us, it's a mixed model — a small internal team but a relatively large agency team.

HEIMAN: Over the past 12 years, I assembled the sports marketing teams, the executive briefing centers, the traditional corporate events group and an experiential department. And they were all siloed. The people in the briefing centers knew telecom really well. The people in events marketing didn't know telecom at all. So I pushed them all together and took more of an approach of finding the best person for a particular assignment at that particular time. And we trained everybody so they understood at least the basis of our business.

Over time, it's been very helpful to be able to pluck somebody out of the sports marketing group to support an event, or pluck somebody out of the briefing center to go work a trade show as a subject matter expert. And from a career perspective, the team loves it.

Finally, four or five years ago, I asked HR to do an audit of what they really do, because event people in marketing are kind of seen as the lowest tier. And HR came back and, not surprisingly, said they're project managers, because they're working on very complicated, long-term projects. They're not traditional marketing people. That allowed me to go back to HR and say, "Re-level these people in the appropriate places."

DENA LOWERY: That's smart. That's so good for them and their career.

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—ANGIE SMITH

EM: And some larger companies might have so many events going on in so many geographies that they actually rely on their agencies to be the connective tissue, and to know what's going on across the company. Dena, do you have an example of that?

LOWERY: Absolutely. We were at a trade show, and a client had one booth here and another one there, and they didn't know. So with some of our clients, on a quarterly basis, we'll say, "These are the events that we're in: We're doing this one for the field team, we got pulled over here for sales, and these are all of the events we're touching." We're giving them visibility into that because it was just a classic case of, "Why are we here? Why are we there?"

EM: There's talk that some of our field's most creative people — at agencies and on the client side — are being lured away to companies like Google and Facebook. Is anyone worried that event marketing is going to face a talent gap?

LOWERY: Certainly from the agency side, this is the world we live in. And I can't compete on a salary level, or certainly with the stock they might get. But we can compete on giving someone different things to try, giving them different experiences. There has to be a lot of thought on how you build a culture, or how you build interesting events for them to be able to work on that keeps them interested in staying.

WEIDICK: I also just lost someone to Google. And you're right about the money part. But it's more about what drives the individual. Some people are looking for a more established company, and more diverse opportunities, but some are figuring out what they want.

I had somebody who was doing executive events, but her affinity is sports marketing, and she moved into that team and is delivering excellent results. And I had someone doing content tools and technology, and she moved into executive events. I never would have thought of that. We're communicating to the teams about those kinds of opportunities, and we therefore have fairly low attrition.

CARR: This is probably the most exciting time in history to be in the automotive industry. In the next 10 years, it's just going to just completely

change. There are so many new and different things you can do, from autonomous vehicles to electrification to "connected" vehicles and so many other things. And our biggest challenge is how to tell those stories.

EM: Switching gears a little: We've seen the level of innovation and creativity in event marketing rise to incredible levels over the past several years. But the question now is, how do you stay innovative? How do you stay in front of the trends? And how do you do those things while continuing to execute all of the events you're already doing?

SMITH: One key is to know your audience and know who cares about what. We have two CEOs, and they care about very different things — and my CMO cares about a totally separate thing. So I need to know who I'm talking to, know what they care about and make sure that that's the information, education and learning I'm constantly filling my brain with. And that I'm talking to enough people within and outside of the business, and that those people can help fuel those conversations for me.

Also, I really instill in my team that they need to become "modern marketers." They can't think of themselves as building careers as event managers — they have to be marketers. The event marketer of the future is someone who considers themselves a marketer, not an event marketer.

CARR: One thing we do is use this filter we call "now-near-far." So if we're talking about something in the market today versus something that's coming shortly or something far out, there are very different ways we can talk about it, and different creative ways we can engage the audience.

We're constantly looking at how we tell the "far" story in particular, because that's what a lot of people are interested in now — for example, the world of autonomous vehicles, and how you prepare people to understand what that means. And we have very different creative ways where you put them in that world — like immersive experiences with VR — versus a "now," where we might want them to sit in a car and show them how the Ford Pass app attaches to the car, and attaches through Amazon to your home. So we're trying to tell that spectrum of stories and



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—GARETT CARR

we’re trying to use different creative ways across the different timeframes.

HEIMAN: I like that, looking at what you have currently, then near and far. For example, I like to use AR to talk about what’s just around the corner, and VR to talk about what’s really out there. Because the medium is the message, right? You put a headset on, and all of a sudden you know it’s not available today, it’s futuristic.

For our most important exhibits, we start from scratch every year, instead of just tweaking what we did, using the same configuration or the same equipment. That forces us to think, “We have a clean slate. What’s the best way to tell this story?” And if it’s with AR or VR or whatever, we lean into what’s possible. That keeps us kind of on the forefront.

EM: [When it comes to adopting new event technology, how do you evaluate all of the options that are out there? How do you manage all of the platforms that are available?](#)

WEIDICK: We have a lot of business partners, and a lot of that assessment happens in my event operations team, but also in the procurement team. We have experts in procurement on event technology, and we partner to look at what is out there. Procurement negotiates for the longer-standing master service agreements. My team negotiates each event contract.

CARR: My biggest issue is technology for the sake of technology. When my agency comes to me and says, “We’re going to be the first ever to do this thing,” my antennae go up. It’s like, that’s not why you do it. You do it because it’s the best way to communicate the story. So you have to find the right technologies that allow you to tell the story you’re trying to tell in the most efficient way. Some of those are old technologies and some of those are new technologies, but we really try to match the technology to the story.

HEIMAN: Because we have executive briefing centers that are just full of all kinds of technology, we have certified engineers working on those teams. So I’m able to leverage

their expertise. They can even get inside and code things — they’re those kinds of engineers. So I’m kind of fortunate in that regard, having engineers on my staff.

SMITH: I have one event technologist on my team — it’s a new role. We manage a stack of 11 technologies that are necessary and important to all of our event portfolio. And somehow after almost four years, the technologies all talk to each other, which is awesome.

HEIMAN: You’re lucky.

SMITH: We’ve had to pay handsomely to do it, to build APIs and integration points. But we’re really proud of our technology stack now. Our procurement team has been along the journey with us, and they’ve helped us vet some of that. I’ve also had to outsource some of the sourcing of our event technologies with our agency, because I just didn’t know where to go. But there’s a great group of technology providers that are part of the Event Tech Tribe, and they’ve made it easy with APIs and integration talking, and they’re sort of working together as a consortium. So that’s been really helpful to us, too.

LOWERY: And it’s only going to get more complex. For us, it’s really a matter of being out there, going to the events, understanding what the technology is and how it works together, and being able to have those conversations with the different technology partners.

CARR: Another interesting thing is that while all of this technology is happening, some of the lowest-tech stuff are what people interact with the most. Like, you want that Instagram-able moment, and you want consumers to share that they were on your stand. At the New York Auto Show, we had Ford in block letters, where you could stick your head in there and it had our hashtag. And that was the thing that was posted online the most — just somebody taking a picture of themselves in this low-tech environment.

You’ve got this high-tech stuff going on, trying to connect everything together and following the lead to the sale, but at the same time you’re trying to get people to share these low-tech things. So it’s a really interesting time.

LOWERY: Somewhat tied to that is the consultation we’re doing now on GDPR and the collection of customer information. We’re asking whether clients actually need to know what color customers’ eyes are. Do you really need their address? And what is the information you really need for those individuals as they come to your event? Because the stakes are so high on GDPR.

WEIDICK: It’s fascinating that you bring that up, because our foundation at Oracle is security; the CIA was our first customer. We are fairly risk-averse, so there are many technologies we aren’t even allowed to use. But people come to in-person events to connect with other people, and they need to know who’s there. So we have to have long conversations with our risk and compliance teams to try and get beyond that.

I think you're right — there needs to be a discussion around what is important to know, and what isn't, and what can be shared and what can't. You don't have to share contact information, but wouldn't it be great to anonymously heatmap where people are moving to design a better experience for them?

EM: How are you getting smarter about activating budgets?

CARR: We have two separate budgets: a capital budget and an expense budget. We use the capital budget to build assets that last a little bit longer, maybe three or four years. For example, we'll build a virtual reality machine, and that will be in our capital budget. And then from our expense budget, we'll build new software every year. So the experience can change within the capital assets. We try to sweat our assets as much as we can, because we're shipping things around the country. We have up to eight different tours going on around the country at the same time, so we're buying assets, and shipping them around, and it becomes like a jigsaw puzzle. The capital budget allows us to do some of that experimentation, and to try to be more creative, and build things that we can use for the future and evolve over time. So that helps.

EM: Before we wrap up, as you look forward to the next few years, what are you most excited about, and what are you most afraid of?

SMITH: I'm just most excited to have our events be much more strategically led and focused on the business, versus just looking at what we've always done, and identifying if it's really necessary.

We've put together a three-to-five-year plan that we launched last year. Now that we're one year in, this is when we can roll up our sleeves and make some serious cuts and do the right things. And that's exciting, because I know that'll be more relevant. And the biggest challenge will be to create capacity to do all of these things, because you know the only thing consistent is change, and something is going to change.

WEIDICK: I love the optimism of starting a new year — we started our new fiscal June 1 — and the opportunity it presents. I'm excited that the content, the storytelling and the customers are all coming together, and I think it'll create a better experience. I'm always fascinated to try new things, see if we can really have a good hook for our audience, and measure the results. And our measurement gets better every year. So I'm looking forward to being able to launch new programs and measure them.

What am I not looking forward to? The budget process.

HEIMAN: In the cellular industry, about every 10 years we get to roll out a totally new generation of technology. So over the next couple of years we'll be rolling out 5G, which will allow us to do all kinds of fun things. There will be creative ways to show how people's lives will change and how work will change with 5G and what it brings. So we'll do experiential tours and we are retooling our executive briefing centers. The live events we go to, we'll be able to go into deep brand immersion with hands-on experiences. So it's a very fun time, frankly, to be in the industry.

CARR: We launched a program called Auto Shows 2.0 last year, and I'm really excited to see how that continues to evolve. We're trying to convince auto shows that they need to change the way they do things. Some are going outside the hall, so we're talking about how you break out of the hall and bring your products more to life. We've created a capital asset that can go inside, outside and all different places. So we're really excited to see how we can move forward. And, like Tania, I'm concerned on the budget side. It's a challenge, let's just say.

LOWERY: One concern is staff resources. How do you find them, how do you teach them and offer growth internally, and maintain those resources. But this is a cool time in events, where there's an understanding that as noisy as the world gets, we know how important a live experience is, and what it does afterwards. So I'm excited about that.

