

# Key Strategies for Boosting Audience Attendance

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## Executive Summary

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If you build it, will they really come? The answer, most certainly, is no. While a vast amount of effort remains focused on the content for the forthcoming event program, we as event planners know better than to ignore the dreaded job of building awareness and ultimately driving both registration and attendance. Our tools for accomplishing this have broadened dramatically, yet a lack of clarity within the selection available offers us little comfort when choosing where to focus our time, effort and dollars.

Each and every event is unique, but audience acquisition campaigns all have the same purpose: get the right people to the right place at the right time. The first step is defining what that means. Who are the right people? What is the right place and what do they do once they are there? Only once your target audience is defined and your objectives set are you ready to choose the right tactics to drive awareness, attract consideration and encourage engagement.

The available tactics can satisfy your needs affordably, with the right plan acting as a conductor, carefully orchestrating their use along your event timeline. Ensuring that every tactic is chosen with a clear purpose can help limit excess effort. Too often tactics become isolated campaigns in and of themselves, unable to take advantage of the success of surrounding tactics. Coordinating the use of various communication channels and directing potential attendees across channels within each tactic chosen can boost the overall value of the campaign beyond the sum of its parts.

Regardless of the tactics themselves, the key to success is the plan coordinating their use. Many event planners can execute individual tactics well, but only the best will create a plan to realize the highest value out of the overall campaign. Blending existing traditional communications channels like newsletters and direct mail with new, emerging communications channels like social media, emails and video calls-to-action can, and will, have a profound impact on how we as event planners communicate with our audience.

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## Introduction

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Tying marketing programs to business outcomes is the primary challenge for every marketer. When planning events, this challenge can be even greater because many of the benefits are often difficult to quantify (e.g. brand loyalty) or may even be delayed (future sales). In a difficult macroeconomic environment, the pressure to ensure that your brands stay relevant, that you remain connected to customers, and to realize the very real but the practically intangible benefits of positive brand perception is even greater. The stakes are higher with more limited resources. So when you invest in a program whether it's a live or virtual event, you want to ensure its success. Ultimately, event success means reaching the right audience and engaging with them in a meaningful way.

A common mistake in event planning is thinking that compelling content alone or previous engagement alone will be enough to drive attendance without active promotion and continuous engagement; or even still, that registration alone will be indicative of event attendance. During economic downturns, tightening budgets can be a primary driver to cut corners on coordinated programs that generate awareness, drive registration, and inspire engagement and attendance. There is often a mistaken assumption that all lead generation plans have to be resource intensive, but the truth is that you can develop plans for a variety of budgets and many tactics can be very efficient.

While there isn't one single perfect audience acquisition plan, there are five basic rules that should be followed.

**Ultimately, event success means reaching the right audience and engaging with them in a meaningful way.**

## Five Basic Rules

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### 1) Set Goals & Objectives

Plans need to be designed with event goals and objectives in mind and with the knowledge of the target audience and tools we have available. For example:

- How media savvy is our audience?
- Is this a group of technology and media early adopters or late followers?
- Are we targeting existing customers only, or are we reaching out to a broader population?
- Are we solely interested in generating volume of registrations, or is the audience mix important too; i.e. are there specific sub-segments that we are targeting?
- Will our keynote speakers support our efforts?
- Do we have the ability to offer incentives?
- And the list of questions goes on.



### 2) Define Channels & Tactics

Plans need to incorporate multiple channels and tactics. Research shows that in order for people to take action, they need to be exposed to messages multiple times. Therefore, you're more likely to achieve registration and attendance goals by reaching out to your audience in a number of different ways.



### 3) Plan for Awareness, Consideration & Engagement

Your plan should account for all aspects of event awareness, consideration and engagement knowing that every tactic can't necessarily accomplish all three.



### 4) Use Social Media

Social media can be a powerful tool in all three phases of event planning and audience engagement, but its effectiveness is directly related to the level of commitment and effort that's invested. Social media isn't an automated process and requires active guidance.



## 5) Revise & Refine

Don't be afraid to tweak and alter your plan as data concerning effectiveness of specific tactics becomes available.

Driving your desired results is a combination of:

- The right tactics
- Proper lead time
- Compelling content
- Targeted calls to action
- Offers which traffic and registration as well as inspire the audience to ultimately attend the event.

So what are some common elements that can be combined into a robust plan that has a variety of budgets in mind?

## Awareness Tactics

### Corporate Website & Corporate Communications

If you're looking to attract an audience that is already engaged with your company, your first action should be to piggy back on your existing outreach tools: your corporate website and any outbound communications, such as newsletters. While promoting your event in these channels will only begin to move the needle on awareness with an already engaged audience, they are cost-effective opportunities to initiate the dialogue that shouldn't be entirely overlooked.

### Banner Ads in Trade Newsletters & Websites

If you're looking to attract a new audience, and a primary metric of success is going to be registrations and bodies in attendance, then you have to cast a wide net. Banner ads and in-text "spotlights" in industry websites and newsletters can expand awareness of your event to your target audience for relatively short dollars. Online ads with video have also proven to be more effective than static ones; according to reports from DoubleClick they're almost three times more effective at generating positive brand perception and driving action.

### Social Media

Not to be forgotten are the vast resources that the social web has to offer. Social Media, by definition, is the organic distribution of information through social channels. Social channels have proliferated online with practically limitless

opportunities for people to share information quickly and accurately. Taking advantage of the social web can be valuable, yet unpredictable since the users determine when, how and how much of the information you provide to distribute.



Creating awareness on the social web still requires a well-planned approach despite its organic and viral nature. Sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter can provide excellent results if used to target the right audiences, and if the content is well coordinated. Social media is about a engaging in a two-way conversation, so the key to a successful awareness campaign through this channel is constant participation the from users and the sponsoring organization.

**Online ads with video have also proven to be more effective than static ones.**

## Direct Mail

Direct mail as a stand-alone tactic is not the most effective method for attracting a crowd. However, when used as part of a multi-channel campaign to reinforce your message and drive people to more interactive channels, and combined with a business reply card, it can be highly successful. It is also a cost-efficient option with a flexible platform for segmented messaging when using variable printing runs. The keys to success are the timing of delivery, the look and feel of the imagery, the ease of response, integration with other channels and the relevance of the content.

## Email Blasts

It's hard to imagine any communications campaign that wouldn't include email, but the key to a successful email campaign is in the timing/frequency, the actual message itself and the subject line. An email can't drive any action if it's not opened. Whether it is a save-the-date or early bird registration incentive, VIP offer or a last-minute call to action, the effectiveness of the subject line, the nature of

the message and the layout of the email will be the determining factors in dictating positive response rates. Once the email is opened, it has to be crafted to appeal to a scanning audience, not a reading audience, by using images for visual cues; bullets; bolded text and concise, meaningful content.



## How do I engage users?

Engaging users is easier than you think. Social media is full of casual conversation and colloquialisms, so don't feel the need to over polish your communication. In fact, be personal. Say things like "all of us at xyz company are excited to see you at our next event. It's gonna be awesome," as opposed to "Your attendance is appreciated. Click here to register."

If you do post your event on a social media channel, make sure you routinely check up on it and try to add new content and updates. Something as simple as listing new speakers or asking attendees what they would like to hear can be enough to get a conversation started.

## Consideration & Engagement Tactics

### Event Microsite

Microsites are a necessary element to any lead generation campaign. They are a central hub for all interaction with the target audience through all three stages of planning—pre-event, on-site and post event. Microsites can be robust, fully-functional resource tools with rich interactive features or a single landing page with basic event information and the call to registration. Both ends of the spectrum add tremendous value.

The main appeal of any live event is the face-to-face interaction and opportunities to connect with colleagues and peers. A microsite extends the lifecycle of any program by beginning the interaction prior to the event itself and then allowing

you to deliver archived event content for on-demand viewing. They also present unlimited opportunities to engage with your audience—and for them to engage with each other—while segmenting your message and driving targeted calls to action.

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## Tools for Engagement on Microsites

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### Official Event Blogs

Let users stay informed about the goings-on before, during and after the event with a professionally-authored blog. Offer sneak peeks and “behind the scenes” content that are exclusive to this channel to reward those users who take the time to read.

### User Forums

Encourage discussion amongst attendees through facilitated forums that solicit for feedback both before and after the event. What better way for an attendee to feel valued.

### Interactive Games

While seemingly cheesy, simple interactive games can engage attendees in the content of the event early and get them invested in participating. Offer prizes to winners to deepen that investment.

### Polls & Surveys

Event organizers need to get quantitative data out of the event attendees and what better place to offer pre-event and post-event data gathering opportunities than on the microsite itself.

### Email Video Call to Action

Beyond awareness, email can be used to drive segmented actions and continue to captivate your audience even beyond event registration. In addition to the focus on brief, compelling subject lines to increase email open rates, embedded video can increase click through rates and engagement with your content. According to Internet Retailer, the use of video in outbound email campaigns can increase click through rates by as much as 28%. Forrester is even more bullish on the use of video in email —according to a recent report, it can increase click-through by as much as two or three fold. Video can give you a huge boost in terms of brand perception and engagement, without necessarily blowing out your budget.

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## Video-on-Demand (VOD)

On-demand video services are increasing in popularity for two reasons: internet audiences want information when they want it, and they are more likely to consume video content than written content. It is fast becoming one of the most effective and efficient ways of reaching a target audience.

Video-on-demand presents event organizers with the ability to pique the interest of a potential audience with messages from a senior executive or keynote speaker and distribute it via the web to a target audience. It can be an all-encompassing greeting/invitation, or multiple variations can be recorded to attract specific sub-segments within a larger audience. It can be a segmented, seamless, timely way to deliver a key message or tease content that will entice registration and

ultimately attendance.

Archive features allow for repeated access views, the development of serialized content, the viral effects of link forwarding, or potentially posting to a user's profile within social channels.

The key to success is to provide incentives, a clear and easy way to register and compelling reasons to attend.



**FIGURE 1: VIDEO ON DEMAND PLATFORM**

*On Demand Services are increasing in popularity for two simple reasons: internet audiences want information when they want it...and fast*

## Personalized URL (PURL)

A PURL is a component of cross channel marketing campaigns that allows for personalization and greater segmentation—both of which yield user responses at rates exponentially higher than traditional direct campaigns. Cross channel campaigns use segmented and personalized content in emails and direct mail to drive to a microsite featuring your name in the URL, personalized messaging, calls to action and specific offers. PURL technologies allow for tracking at the individual user level. Robust PURL platforms allow you to automate a campaign and drive your audience to the next best action at their own pace, and even drive the relationship with individualized “soft selling” based on specific actions taken.

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The personalized microsite is generally part of a larger multi-channel campaign and it can be a larger investment but typically delivers response rates well above standard campaign averages.

## Incentives

Don't underestimate the need for incentives to help you achieve your goals and to drive your audience to action. Whether its discounted registration fees, two-for-one specials, bonus programming and networking opportunities or even free schwag be creative in matching the incentive to your audience and the desired action.

## Social Media

The use of social media doesn't stop at awareness. In fact, social media can prove its value very quickly during consideration. According to a consumer survey conducted by Nielsen in July 2009, 90% of consumers trust peer recommendations from people they know, whereas only 33% trust banner ads. Users who receive a peer recommendation, or simply see that a peer is attending, as well as get an official communication via email or direct mail are far more likely to attend than if they had received the official communication alone.

Social media can drive engagement as well. Every engagement activity is now publishable and sharable, and ultimately attracts more attention and drives more engagement which can take place at any point within the event lifecycle. Attendees and potential attendees can engage in topical discussion through forums on the event microsite, which can help drive the content at the actual meeting. During the meeting, professional journalists can summarize activity on an official event blog and solicit comments and feedback from the attendees as well as non-attendees. Twitter hashtags can allow users to broadcast short bursts of information about the meeting to other attendees as well as non-attendees who want to follow the event online. Post-event communications can solicit feedback from attendees who can summarize the event in their own words, ultimately driving peer recommendations for the event's next installment.

No matter what your use of social media to drive engagement, it should be planned and coordinated to educate your audience and encourage them to interact with the features that you've provided. Simply dumping forums, chats and opportunities to connect everywhere can be harmful if the attendees cannot readily derive the proper way to use the systems. Thus, a plan for engagement mapped to your event timeline is critical to the success of the overall program. The most important aspect to a social media strategy is to actively monitor and manage it.

## Conclusion

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No matter what methods of content delivery are selected, a mix of tactics that are tailored towards your audience, the proper planning and lead time will be equally vital to any campaign's success. Many companies who suffer from poor attendance are so focused on the content of the event, that the drive to the event and the post registration engagement become secondary. Waiting too long before investigating more proactive and coordinated communications limits the choices and strategies that are available. While it is crucial to offer a quality program with stimulating content and high-level production value, the reality is that more people are staying home or being more selective as to which events they will attend.

The best time to plan and implement a standout audience acquisition and engagement strategy is as far out as 10 months in advance of your event. This is a time when details of a recently completed program are still fresh, as is the feedback from its attendees. It will also allow for contingency planning and give you time to course correct along the way so you're always driving towards your desired results.

There is a temptation to just ride out tough economic times by adopting a "wait and see" mentality. There are proven tactics to draw in and engage audiences in order to fully capitalize on the investment in your program, but not every tactic is appropriate for every audience or every organization, for that matter. Some tactics that depend on a lower overall budget investment, including most social media, require a greater time and human resource commitment. But you can craft effective programs to fit just about any level of budget and resource investment. So once the audience, tools and resources are understood, and the timelines and strategies are in place, you can develop and execute a plan to drive desired results and maintain strong attendance and engagement to reap the full benefits of your program despite a difficult economic climate.

**Many companies who suffer from poor attendance are so focused on the content of the event, that the drive to the event and the post registration engagement become secondary.**

## Appendix: Sample Campaigns

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One possible way to look at campaigns is in terms of the use of social media, since it's not appropriate for every audience or realistic to maintain for every organization. It can be overwhelming to look at the options described in this paper and think about how to combine them into a coordinated program. Below are a couple of examples of how the various elements can be combined into a program to drive action.

### Sample Simple Traditional Campaign Components

#### Event microsite

A simple site can be launched as much as 9 months out to begin to post venue and programming information.

#### Direct mail

Direct mail can start months in advance with save the date messaging and continue through the drive to registration.

#### Email blasts

Like direct mail, email should start months in advance with save the date messaging and can continually be leveraged to drive actions within your target audience—whether its teaser video content to folks who have yet to commit or exclusive pre-event access or reminders for those who have already registered.

#### Company newsletter and website posts

Announcements can begin at the same time as your save the date messages, and potentially before. Feature a prominent link to your event microsite and continue to promote speakers that are engaged and news. This can also be an opportunity to offer loyal customers special offers and incentives.

#### Twitter Hashtag

Though Twitter is a social channel, claim the hashtag, at a minimum, and promote it in your other communications to harness the discussion around your program.

## Sample Simple Social Media Campaign Components

Social media channels are complementary tools to any campaign. In addition to any or all of the tactics used within a traditional campaign, below are a couple of simple social media elements that can be used for initial experimentation with the channel.

- Event microsite with social media sharing components, including blogging
- As the time for your event gets closer, add social media features to your microsite such as event blogs features that easily integrates and posts any of the site's content to Facebook and other sharing sites. Initiate and lead the discussion with an official event blog and by creating user forums.

## About Cramer

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Cramer is a digital marketing and event solutions agency that fuses creativity and technology to design and execute experiences that move audiences.

For more than 25 years, the agency has helped the world's leading and emerging brands win and retain loyal customers, launch products and inspire sales teams. Reaching audiences online, offline, through emerging media, and face-to-face, Cramer creates personalized, integrated marketing programs and events that maximize marketing impact – and their clients' dollars. Cramer's clients include Boston Scientific, Gillette and EMD Serono, Inc. Cramer is a privately held company. For more information please go to <http://www.crameronline.com> or visit their blog at <http://www.awidernet.com>.

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