

Everything's so serious - time we loosened up a little!

By  Karen Ashwin

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In reviewing the past few years from an events perspective, I'm tempted to ask: "Where did all the fun go?" As both the South African and the international events industries have grown, developed, matured and become increasingly competitive - all within the context of the global economic crisis - I might be forgiven for thinking that the game plan has changed.



Business is business as never before. We're all out to ensure value for our clients and our companies at every turn - and don't you forget it!

Corporate largesse and generosity has been replaced by incisive, focused marketing, where brand is king while strategy and ROI retain their status as defining parameters. Instead of being treated to a fancy gift upon leaving an event, you're more likely to find some brand information in your goodie bag as a take-home gift (unless you're a movie star, attending the Oscars, of course).

Brand touch points are imaginatively handled with expert creativity and technical wizardry, while social marketing and social media vie for the number-one spot in the stakes as the most powerful and influential marketing tool.

However, no matter how unreservedly clever, creative, slick and cybersavvy the event industry is - or is likely to ever become - the edge it still enjoys is the fact that humans thrive on real contact with others! So, while events will never become obsolete or less popular, their scale in terms of size and budget is more in line with global economic trends... which, as we all know, are not headed for explosive growth right now.

• What - no Christmas Party?

Although Christmas has traditionally been a time of goodwill, year-end celebrations and ubiquitous office parties, many of us might be relieved to know that these are fast becoming a thing of the past! Perpetually tightening budgets and ever more-carefully considered expenditure have resulted in a happy turn of events, for long suffering individuals who now no longer have to boogie the afternoon away with their colleagues or share interminable dinners with difficult clients.

Instead, organisations are spending quality time with their CSI projects of choice, and often inviting their clients and suppliers to do the same - which makes for an enlightening and enriching experience. To my way of thinking, spending the day painting a community centre or crèche is far more worthwhile than making small talk at a company Christmas lunch.

• Events for the a-list

From conceptualisation to execution and well beyond, events are more targeted. Prospective guests are carefully selected, analysed (in terms of their current or potential spend) and then tracked to determine if they actually attended the event or not. Every attempt is made to realise maximum marketing impact and ensure that there is no time wasted pursuing clientele who will not be beneficial to the business relationship.

• Staff training still a priority

While company staff might be feeling the global economic squeeze by no longer being invited to enjoy corporate parties or celebrations, rest assured they stand to benefit from their company's change of focus by an ongoing

investment in skills development. The size of staff-training budgets attests to their importance, be they allocated to national conferences, video conferences, regional focus groups, broadcasts or internet streaming.

• Pulling rabbits out of hats

Here I'm not only referring to that wow factor that leaves clients and guests musing - gee, that's clever, why didn't I think of that? - rather to diminishing budgets, matched by even greater expectations for something relevant, memorable and just plain awesome! In this context, handling brand touchpoints means engaging creative ways of presenting the message to the target audience. The days of longwinded events with tons of entertainment is relegated to history.

Today, face-to-face communication takes centre stage, supported by spectacular technology, designed to generate tweets and Facebook-interactions galore, celebrating the event - and of course, the brand experience.

Just as an acorn strives to grow into a mighty oak, every brand desires to be great and as event marketers our role is to assist our clients in achieving their goal.

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ABOUT KAREN ASHWIN

Karen Ashwin is the founder and MD of The Event Production Company (www.theeventcompany.co.za), South Africa's event pioneer. Karen is considered one of the industry's leading personalities and has a track record of 21 years, with The Event Production Company having conceptualised and executed most of South Africa's largest, most significant, high profile and innovative events. Contact details: tel +27 (0)11 883 0470 | email karen@eventcompany.co.za

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