

Embracing Social Networking to Increase Event Attendance and Build Community.

Client background – AARP

AARP is one of the largest member organizations in America; it offers its members a wide-ranging set of relevant benefits that helps people 50 and over improve the quality of their lives.

- For more than 50 years, AARP has been serving its members and creating positive social change.
- AARP's mission is to enhance the quality of life for all as we age, leading positive social change and delivering value to members through information, advocacy and service.
- AARP believes strongly in the principles of collective purpose, collective voice, and collective purchasing power, and these principles guide all organization efforts.

AARP performs research and advocacy, offers a wide range of products and services, and distributes information via its own magazine, newspaper, web-site and events.

The AARP 2009 National Event and Expo

Vegas@50+ is three days and nights of concerts, celebrity speakers and engaging educational forums, and is attended by over 30,000 attendees and 500 exhibitors.

Show management is dedicated to adding more value to the event. They wanted to create an environment that was more engaging, more interactive, built a stronger sense of community and purpose around the event – and was available year round.

Management was also watching the economy very carefully to best anticipate its effect on the event. Management decided that, although both attendees and exhibitors were extremely cost-sensitive, the event would be better - both this year and in the future - if an extra effort were made to offer added value now, rather than reduced expectations and price reductions.

Project Goals

The major goals of AARP event management are familiar to most event organizers.

- Increase Attendance and Participation
- Enhance Attendee and Exhibitor Experience
- Increase Sponsorship and Advertising Revenue

Beyond meeting those goals, AARP decided that additional value could be delivered that would also strengthen connections and build community. A longer list of goals was made that would include all participants.

- Drive traffic to the website;
- Convert visitors to registered attendees and participating exhibitors;
- Enhance the experience of both attendees and exhibitors;
- Extend the event 24/365 to last before, during and after the show;
- Increase revenue from sponsorships by adding new-media opportunities;
- Provide exhibitors self-provisioning tools;
- Provide exhibitors a better advertising platform for targeted, measurable promotions;
- Provide broader and longer distribution to maximize ROI for exhibitors' ad spending;
- Provide attendees easy-to-use tools that are non-invasive and put them in control;

- Provide connections via pro-active social marketing tools, intent-based response, and content-in-context;
- Maintain connections and stay relevant beyond the event;
- Cut Costs;
- Go Green.

"After seeing strong participation in You Are Here on the exhibit floor at last years' event, we decided that offering the system online and integrating its social and event marketing tools was great way to add value," said CB Wismar, Vice President AARP Events. "You Are Here will help us drive attendance, enhance everyone's experience at Vegas@50+, and keep us all connected as we look forward to Orlando in 2010."

AARP and MarketArt

AARP and MarketArt worked closely to design and implement the full suite of You Are Here for the 2009 National Event. The system is deployed both on the AARP event show website and will be also distributed on multiple stations throughout the event space itself. Working from last years experience with You Are Here on the Floor, the AARP marketing team presented its goals and design criteria to MarketArt. Design refinement included input from the web marketing, sales and operations teams. Further refinement and testing was carried out over two months and resulted in the implementation described below.

As the entire system is designed with integrated tools that satisfy multiple criteria for multiple user-types it is difficult to 'assign' a product to satisfy a particular problem or provide a particular solution. The project is described here in terms of challenges and solutions.

Project Implementation

**Drive traffic to the show's website;
Convert visitors to registered attendees and participating exhibitors;**

To drive traffic to the show's website AARP will use its own marketing channels to educate and encourage potential visitors to come visit the site. Once at the site, You Are Experience (branded as AARP Experience) acts as a highly visual, interactive view into the multiple layers of information on the show site. Experience is an application unlike any other webpage visitors are familiar with. It is easy-to-use and is designed to make the site stickier and present the show in a way that presents as much information as possible before visitor fatigue – and bounce - sets in. As a teaser or an abstract into the entire event, the user is given an immediate appreciation of the breadth and depth of the events offerings. Previews of the tools all attendees and exhibitors will get create both a sense of high value and excitement and create the conviction and desire to register to attend or to buy a booth space.

Social tools and networks engage users and drive traffic to the show site.

Once registered, every attendee and exhibitor has access to personal space on the show's website. Everyone gets a 'badge' that they can use to let everyone know they will be going to the event. These powerful social tools give both attendees and exhibitors the ability to extend their own presence on the show site to friends, colleagues, prospects and customers they might want to contact. These tools can be easily deployed

in the users' own email, websites and social networks. The dynamic combination of users, tools and networks drives traffic to the user's own content on the system -- and to the event website.

For exhibitors, the badge can be part of their pre-show marketing. When a recipient clicks on a badge they are taken right to the AARP Experience, taken right into the exhibitors own micro-site that displays all the information about what they will be displaying at the show – and even zooms in right to their booth on the show floor! Encouraging exhibitors to use badges as part of their own marketing program creates a truly viral network effect that amplifies and multiplies show managements' initial marketing efforts.

Enhance the experience of both attendees and exhibitors;
Extend the event 24/365 to last before, during and after the show.
Providing attendees and exhibitors with their own space on the event website early in the engagement process provides show management with obvious communications opportunities. It also empowers the users with tools they can use to either stay anonymous and watch, or embrace and engage.

Attendees are not required to disclose any information they don't want to. They get to control what information is visible to others (if any). They can search and browse the event site right down to the show floor, compiling their own agenda of sessions, speakers, categories, companies, concerts – and even email individuals they want to meet.

Exhibitors get to create their own micro-site on the show's website that gives plenty of space to create custom pages that align with their marketing goals. Self-provisioning account management lets them change the message before, during and after the event. They can see how many visitors they get and - if the visitor opted to - they can see who is visiting.

- **Increase revenue from sponsorships by adding new-media opportunities**
- **Provide exhibitors a better advertising platform for targeted, measurable promotions**
- **Provide exhibitors broader and longer distribution for their ad spending**
- **Provide exhibitors self-provisioning tools**
- **Provide exhibitors with better media and a stronger ROI.**

Exhibitors come to trade shows because they value face-to-face and budget for events as part of their marketing mix. But they also have

multiple marketing activities that are independent of the event. It is challenging to leverage these other activities – and the resources behind them – to fit into the event. Historically, promotional options have been presented in sponsorship packages that cannot satisfy the majority of exhibitors. The nature of sponsorships, by definition, is very limiting in exhibitor participation rates.

The rise of digital media is of no news to anyone but the inclusion of digital media into the event industry has been lagging. Digital information technology solutions have been used in the back offices, at registration, in booth scans and for websites for years – but there has been little use of digital media as an advertising platform. It may be that the event industry itself feels digital advertising is a competitor for sponsorship dollars – and to some degree it is.

AARP management made the decision that offering all their exhibitors an opportunity to leverage their other marketing activities with better media would provide everyone with a better experience and make a better event. With a stronger event, traditional event sponsorships would only get more valuable. Being able to include some new digital options to top sponsors was also a big help in reaching everyone's goals.

Exhibitors now get to use much of the digital content they have invested in for other purposes and re-use them for the event. They get to employ their own micro-sites as external landing pages for targeted messages that they can change before, during and after the event. And of course, the micro-sites can link back to the exhibitors own websites.

For events deploying You Are Here on the Floor, every exhibitor at the show has an opportunity to extend their messaging reach all throughout the show floor. Since the You Are Here screens are always moving and usually have people using them, passers-by are drawn to look at them. The exhibitor's ad or logo is displayed on rotation all throughout the day and on multiple stations all throughout the floor. The number of impressions adds up to a high-impact, high visibility digital signage campaign.

You Are Here is interactive though, and many attendees will stop and use it. They are drawn by other people using it, drawn by the graphic motion or are already familiar with how useful it is. When attendees interact with the system, exhibitors can reach them at exactly the right moment of need. Since the attendee has just searched for a category, or a company, or a product – short of reading their minds and speaking to them directly – there is no better method to satisfy their expressed intent. The

exhibitor's content is presented in exactly the right context, at exactly the right time. If their message is on, they get traffic to their booth.

- **Provide attendees easy-to-use tools that are non-invasive and put them in control;**
- **Provide connections via pro-active social marketing tools, intent-based response, and content-in-context.**

Technology directed at end-users is often overkill or off-target or out-of-reach. As software industry veterans who have built technologies including internet telephony, e-commerce platforms, network security access, PC remote control and desktop mapping – targeted to large and small business, government, associations and consumers - MarketArt has learned that quite often, less is best.

You Are Here on the Floor is a prime example of good design for the purpose. The end-user is often on a crowded trade show floor and they can't know the floorplan as it has only been there for 12 hours or so. (Congratulations to those pre-show planners!) There are these large-screen stations all throughout the show floor and often several people are standing in front of one to use it. Perhaps they are just curiously looking at the digital signage to get a sense of who's exhibiting. Maybe they go up to the station to play with it – see how it works. Or they already know what it is – they go use it with purpose. No challenges, no names, no passwords needed. Click on the ad, see where they are, go off to the booth. Search for a company. Have I seen everything I came to see? Let's look at who's in those categories again. Way on the other side of the hall? Better print a map right here as a reminder.

AARP used You Are Here on the Floor at their 2008 event and was impressed enough by the high usage that they chose to take a closer look at deploying more of MarketArt's solutions. Post-show surveys proved attendees and exhibitors both loved it.

In examining other solutions on the market that specifically addressed connecting attendees and exhibitors, AARP discovered a range of solutions. At one extreme were the multiple CAD-based booth tools providing searchable exhibitor lists. Search by alpha or category and get a return – usually text. Useful, but not much utility beyond the immediacy of the search. The interface for the floor was either non-existing or deployable in such a way as to limit use. Usually the interface on the web was clearly the legacy floor plan designer re-purposed as a marketing vehicle. Matchmaking, when offered at all, is done by the attendee through an agenda-building process.

At the other end solutions using sophisticated data-matching algorithms to match attendee profiles with exhibitors. Users are required to disclose a significant level of detail about themselves and their requirements for the system to be effective. These sophisticated systems are very good for events focused on intense business development activity needing scheduled meetings but of limited use outside of that role. A close examination of other events using these 'auto-matching' solutions revealed disappointing results – people just didn't use it. Attendees are generally not inclined to disclose much information about themselves when expressing their intentions before going to an event.

You Are Here on the Web creates connections by embracing a scalable disclosure concept that respects user intention. When attendees are in their account space online, they choose what information about themselves they want to disclose - and to whom. They may or may not want to send an email to the exhibitor for a meeting. If attendees ask the right questions, the exhibitor responds with relevant content and the attendee can opt to connect – or not. The user is in control.

AARP believes that their user base will be receptive to this type of engagement and anticipates high usage even in the first year of deployment.

Maintain Connections; Staying relevant post-show.

Adding value to the event doesn't end when the show does. One aspect of attendee service that often falls short is post-show access to information. Show managers often receive calls from attendees, days or weeks after the event, requesting information about an interesting product or services they saw while there. The problem is they can't remember the name of the company, the booth number, or what the product was called. Too often the only help available is a link to the exhibitor list. In an effort to end this frustration (for both the attendee and show management) and to allow the exhibitors to benefit from this very qualified lead, AARP is also providing MarketArt's "CrumbTrail".

CrumbTrail is an interactive, map-based, post-show look at every booth a particular attendee visited. When an attendee scanned their badge at any booth at the event, that information was recorded and stored in their online account. CrumbTrail is a feature that displays the record of those scans. It produces a map and listing that highlights those booths on a show-floor map and allows the attendee to 'revisit' that exhibitor. An attendee can also continue their search by visiting exhibitors they may have missed at the show and virtually 'scan' their badge, signaling their interest to the 'exhibitor' as if they were still at the event. AARP believes

this elevated communication between attendee and exhibitor will also extend the show and provide year-long opportunities for networking and building a stronger connections.

Cut Costs; Go Green.

AARP was intent on adding significant value to the event - but stay cost-effective as well. They wanted a solution that solved multiple problems and enabled multiple new opportunities. They wanted a consistent user-interface across multiple engagement points, wanted strong usage and wanted to deliver an enhanced experience.

For an organization the size of AARP it is difficult to argue that You Are Here has impacted their movement to move toward green, sustainable activities. (Their magazine, after all, is the world's largest in circulation.) Yet, there is no doubt that the embrace of digital should alleviate some of the need to print on paper, canvas, plastic, vinyl and on other forms of analog media.

Conclusion

AARP Event Management believes that deploying a solution that casts a large imprint across multiple strategic goals will create economies that multiple single-point solutions cannot. Its dedication to adding value through user engagement, digital media and easy technology will ensure their National Event and Expo will remain relevant for years to come.