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## When things have to go right

When putting the pieces together, hospitality and experiential marketing programs leave little room for error

By Erik Spanberg, Correspondent

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When it comes to what companies can expect at the U.S. Open each year, Mimi Griffin takes no chances. Nine months before the golf championship begins, Griffin, working alongside tournament governing body the U.S. Golf Association, begins a series of seminars with companies that have purchased hospitality packages.

She and other organizers tee up as many scenarios as they can conjure: where tents and other VIP areas are located, how long travel times are likely to be, even the distance in yards between the drop-off parking lots and the course. Is it 200 yards or 400 yards? And why can't corporate guests get closer access? Whatever the question, the emphasis hews toward transparency, she said.

"They feel like we're all in this together," said Griffin, president of MSG Promotions. "They know we're not trying to snow them or up-sell them."



The devil is in the details as agencies plan events such as hospitality for the U.S. Open golf tournament.

Photo by: USGA

Whether a company entertains top customers at a hot-ticket sporting event or stages a fan festival to boost its image and products, the agencies entrusted with managing the details face a crush of to-do lists.

Start with keeping everyone informed, as Griffin's example demonstrates. If the devil truly is in the details, agencies and vendors in the hospitality and experiential sector spend plenty of time in hell.

So much can go wrong, and must go right.

Consider the demands for hosting jaded executives at the Super Bowl, the Olympics or even a regular PGA Tour event or NASCAR race. Sure, good

food and drink and a comfortable suite or hospitality tent help the cause, but such perks are now expected.

“What’s happening now, even at the highest end, is people demand entertainment,” said Brian Gordon, CEO at Engine Shop, which counts Bud Light Lime, Johnson & Johnson and Omega among its clients. “And entertainment isn’t just a DJ or a great band, although that certainly helps. You have to give them things to touch and feel and play with and experience or it’s boring.”

Dede Patterson, vice president of customer entertainment at Team Epic, said the agency tracks the many aspects of preparing for each hospitality event. Various deadlines and targets keep tabs on staffing, lining up vendors, adding and subtracting from guest lists, and developing the creative accents that bring an event to life.

If she is helping a company host a group at a suite inside a stadium or an arena, Patterson begins planning three months in advance, looking at everything from menus to invitation lists to contingency plans. For a major championship or event, the process is year-round, she said.

Two weeks before an event, Patterson’s crew typically does two walk-throughs: one with the client to go over the schedule, entertainment and how everything will work, and another “deeper dive” to make sure everything is in place. “We put ourselves in the shoes of the attendees, clients, guests, suppliers to see how everything works,” she said.

Constant communication, and not just email but face to face, establishes trust and familiarity that can pay off when, inevitably, something goes wrong. Start with weather and what happens if an outdoor event has to be relocated, and go from there. Every event planner frets because experience has made it clear there is ample cause for fretting.

Event planners and agencies say they agonize over everything from what VIPs may ask for (additional tickets and perks) to what happens if a celebrity speaker arrives late and the schedule needs to be changed. Is there a stand-in available in the crowd who could offer a few remarks?

Managing expectations creates constant work, along with what Patterson calls redirection, as in, “I can’t do this for you, but I can do that.” When someone expects three car services to show up on a dime in the middle of the Super Bowl, she adds, it’s worth a gentle nudge to remind clients and guests of the demands and time pressures every vendor faces.

When the details come together, the pitch can be powerful.

At the NBA All-Star Game in Orlando this year, events producer BeCore and Game Seven Marketing helped Nike promote a new shoe. For several days at a mall near the arena, Nike offered visitors a green-screen photo that put fans in the role of all-star player, replete with Nike and team logos in the background. In exchange for providing coveted customer information, such as email addresses and interests, fans received instant streaming and email access for their photos, along with an 18-by-24 photo poster with the same image. Sprinkled through the weekend were appearances by Nike endorsers LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Kevin Durant and Jeremy Lin.

Roger Malinowski, director of strategy and growth at BeCore, points to the little touches (baby powder served as a prop for fans to emulate James’ signature pregame courtside chalk toss) and the uniqueness of the poster

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**DEDE PATTERSON**  
TEAM EPIC

as ways for Nike to leave a lasting impression. Why? Because no one else gave fans that experience during the All-Star Game, he said.

“You can’t just hand somebody a ticket anymore,” Patterson said. “It’s every touch point.”

For many agencies, making the concept come to life follows the most pressing question, as posed by Peter Pearce, vice president of marketing at Team Epic. “What’s going to get people talking?” he asked.



Team Epic maintains a warehouse in Atlanta for stages, tents and kiosks, eliminating the need to rely much on outside contractors.

Photo by: Team Epic

Team Epic searches for the answer as part of its work for the likes of AT&T, ConAgra Foods and Target, among others. A typical example: The agency runs a Heisman Tour for Sports Illustrated, visiting 11 to 12 major college football games each season. Each tour stop features archival articles, covers and other content from Sports Illustrated tied to the week’s game site. For, say, an Auburn-Alabama weekend, those teams and special guests (former players) would be tied to one or both of those particular schools. About 300,000 people visit the exhibit during a typical season.

While many event organizers turn to a fleet of vendors, Team Epic keeps most of its work in-house. A 100,000-square-foot warehouse in Atlanta includes agency-owned stages, tents, trusses, kiosks, even golf carts. Others rely on trusted contractors collected over many years of experience.

Lana Sanders, executive vice president at SportsMark, calls on 400 freelancers scattered around the world. Her firm helps corporate clients such as CBS and sponsors of the Super Bowl, Olympics and the World Cup entertain VIPs. The mind-numbing logistics for such events, saddled with endless traffic and ever-heightened security, make for lengthy lead times.

Planning for Olympic hospitality on behalf of sponsors begins three years in advance. Sanders said the agency put someone on the ground in Brazil, home to the 2014 World Cup, a year ago. She cites transportation to and from events as the biggest headache.

“It’s much more challenging because you’re dealing with large fleets of vehicles that are sometimes not as much in your control as you would like them to be,” Sanders said. “You’re hiring them through the sports property or the organizing committee.”

Dan Mannix, president and CEO of the LeadDog Marketing Group sports and experiential marketing agency, hammers away at details and schedules when it comes to events.

LeadDog handles both business-to-business and general consumer events, including the membership day at the U.S. Open in New York on behalf of the U.S. Tennis Association, NASCAR’s championship weekend and the WWE fan festival. For the 2014 Super Bowl in New York, the agency is working for the local host committee on events tied to the game for a variety of audiences, ranging from locals to VIPs. Discussions on that work are already under way, Mannix said.

For a 10K race, details range from measuring and aligning the course by a specific date to deadlines for securing the sponsor’s logo to put on banners and the start-finish line. And who is responsible for delivering

each part of the project from the respective companies and agencies involved to avoid confusion?

Then, too, Mannix points to the events within an event: Hospitality during a conference or corporate hospitality weekend includes the intricacies of, for example, a golf outing. How many people will be playing? How many buses will be used? Where will they come from? Who are the drivers? How long does it take to make the trip to the course?

In a tent, suite or hotel ballroom, still more questions abound. How many people can fit in the room? Does the hotel lobby allow signs on easels touting an event? Can advertising wraps be installed in the elevators? If so, when would they be installed and how long would they stay up? Who puts them up? What do they look like and when will the art be available to produce them? If a part of the event requires audiovisuals, what kind and where will they come from? Who handles the set-up?

All along, LeadDog and other agencies provide what Mannix calls “more streamlined” updates to clients.

“Clients love when they can see things in progress,” Mannix said. “We try and do it in a snapshot form.”

*Erik Spanberg writes for the Charlotte Business Journal, an affiliated publication.*

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