

# How to Launch a Successful Events Business

Publisher  
Best Practices  
for Launching  
Events That Make  
Audiences Happy  
and Bottom Lines  
Healthy

A WHITE PAPER COMMISSIONED BY:



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## Publisher Best Practices for Launching Events That Make Audiences Happy and Bottom Lines Healthy

### WHY EVENTS?

Some magazine publishers have been doing events for quite a while. However, with the rise of the internet and the continued disruption of the traditional magazine business model, there has been a recent events boon in the industry as publishers turn to events as a healthy source of revenue growth.

One reason for this increase is that events are an intuitive venture for publishers. Publishers are experts at gathering audiences around common interests and creating a sense of community among their readers. Launching an event takes this expertise to the next level and provides audiences with the opportunity to have a richer experience with a publisher's brand. And the fact that publishers have built-in audiences that can be converted to attendees is a tremendous asset that many are eager to take advantage of.

In this report, we'll look at the key considerations a publisher should make in order to launch a successful event. The emphasis will be on designing a sustainable event that will be a win for everyone involved – the publisher, the attendees, and the sponsors.

While marketing is crucial, the best marketing tool for an event is really the event itself: the programming, the venue, the people, and an overall experience attendees can only have in-person. Once this is in place – which is no easy task – then a lot of the standard marketing playbook will apply.

### DESIGNING AN EVENT THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

The publisher mantra of “audience first” is perhaps no more true than when applied to launching an event. The reason being that attending an event is a much larger commitment than publishers typically ask of their audiences, such as signing up for a newsletter or subscribing to a magazine. Attending an event could cost an attendee hundreds or even thousands of dollars to attend, as well as valuable time away from home or the office. It's crucial to ensure that you're building a high-value product for potential attendees.



“The secret to any special event is attendance and getting the right people there,” says Randy Bauler, Corporate Relations & Exhibits Director for the [American Association of Critical-Care Nurses \(AACN\)](#). The AACN holds the annual [National Teaching Institute & Critical Care Exposition \(NTI\)](#), attracting hundreds of enthusiastic critical care nurses each year through a mix of career-required education and an invaluable sense of community among other healthcare professionals. And although Bauler is in charge of the exhibit floor, he says that the starting point is always the attendees. Once you have attendees, you’ll have sponsors.

### **DETERMINE THE TOPIC**

Bauler says that publishers and associations have the benefit of having audiences and communities that are interested in common topics. The question then becomes, what topic or topics are so important to your audience that they’ll be compelled to attend an event about it? Fortunately, publishers have a lot of rich information about their readers and their passions.

### **Talk to Your Editors**

Any event you launch should be an extension of your brand and the content you already produce. As such, a conversation with your editorial teams should be one of the first steps you take to identify event topics.

THE AACN HOLDS ACCREDITED EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS ON THEIR EXHIBIT FLOOR TO DRIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH SPONSORS.

Editors have their fingers on the pulse of the audience and should know what they want to learn about to improve their personal or professional lives, what kind of information they're eager to consume, who they want to meet and learn from, and the products and brands they want to engage with. Editors should also be able to dig into your content analytics to see what subjects readers are spending a lot of time with.

### Look at the Data

Publishers have plentiful data about their audiences, and with the rise of unified audience databases and analytics tools, publishers are getting better at extracting insights from that data. Your audience development team should be a crucial resource in launching an event as they will be able to provide data on how many people you might have in a certain geographic region or with a particular job function.

You should also consider the ways in which you can reach your readers for event promotions. Email is perhaps the most powerful tool for converting audience members to registered attendees. If you only have physical addresses for your magazine subscribers, it will limit your ability to get attendees to your event.

### Survey the Competition

It's important to take time to survey what is and isn't being done in terms of events in your space. The presence of other events can serve as proof that people are willing to attend events on certain topics that concern your audience. Yet, it's also evidence that you'll be competing for attendees. Ask yourself a question: Can you hold an event that is better than or different from others in that space? Or: Can you identify a vacuum where you see a need for an event but for which no event exists?

### DEFINE YOUR EVENT OBJECTIVE

A topic isn't enough. A successful event will need a well-formulated objective that conveys what attendees will get out of your event. In the B2B space, this could be to provide education related to the attendee's profession, or for a food enthusiast publication, to provide the opportunity to taste new foods and hear from celebrity chefs.

Author, events expert, and popular keynote speaker Andrew Davis, says that, above all, publishers should strive to create an event that is going to be sustainable. "Publishers should focus on sustainable events instead of one-offs and workshops," says Davis. "The effort is almost the same for a one day event as for a multiple day event."

Davis says that publisher events typically fall into a handful of different categories worth considering before you launch your event:

- **Recognition & Celebration** – Events that aim to recognize individuals or organizations for special achievements with awards.
- **Hot Topics** – These events serve to educate or engage attendees around a trending topic; often based around new technologies, innovations, or fads.
- **Marque Events** – These events are a direct extension of the publication itself and often coincide with a product expo connected to the publisher's market. Davis says these events often start off with 100 or 200 attendees and grow into flourishing franchises.

“The secret to any special event is attendance and getting the right people there.”

– Randy Bauler, Corporate Relations & Exhibits Director for the [American Association of Critical-Care Nurses \(AACN\)](#)



Davis encourages publishers to pursue marque events that can be held annually and for which there's an opportunity for repeat attendance. "The biggest challenge for a publisher may not be in launching an event in the first year, but being able to sustain and grow that business," says Davis. "The biggest challenge is repeat attendance while you grow an event. I've been to many annual events where the number of return attendees is low. They tend to put on the same event year after year. But the most successful, growing events have 60-70% returning attendees."

Of course, publishers have had luck by jumping on a hot trend and launching an event around it. But if you're looking to launch your first event, Davis' takeaway is to look at an event objective that will sustain over time. And by no means does your event objective have to be singular in nature. Many events have components of recognition and trending topics, but long-term success will come when publishers can tie an event closely to their magazine brand and build it around a persistent interest held by their audience.

Eventually, you should be able to focus your event objective to a clear and concise mission statement that guides your content strategy, sponsorship outreach, and attendee marketing. Your readers should be able to read this and know immediately what value they'd get from attending your event.

### DEFINE YOUR PERSONAS

If you're approaching your event with an "audience first" mindset, you should be thinking about who your attendees are from the beginning. Depending on your event and the revenue model, exactly who attends your event could be imperative to success. In B2B, association, and

ATTENDEES PARTICIPATE IN AN EDUCATIONAL SESSION AT THE NTI CONFERENCE & EXPO IN 2008 IN CHICAGO, ONE OF AACN'S LARGEST CONFERENCES BY PROFESSIONAL ATTENDANCE.

professional publishing, sponsors typically want to interface with the people that are making buying decisions for the products they're selling. This is even truer when there is an expo hall component to your event.

"You want the buyers and the decision makers that can go on the exhibit floors and place an order," says Randy Bauler of AACN. Any nurse can attend the AACN's conference, but making the expo hall a success from an exhibitor standpoint means having the "right" people. "The attendees we want are the nurses that work with acute and critically ill patients, often working in emergency rooms, as well as critical care transport, ambulances, and helicopters."

## EVALUATE SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITY

With a clear sense of who will be attending your event and for what purpose, you should be able to start considering the best path to monetization. Revenue for publisher events is typically driven by attendee registration (the price of admission), sponsorships, or perhaps most common, a combination of the two. The direction you take will depend greatly on the market you're in, the willingness of attendees to pay for an event, and the objectives of sponsors in your space.

From the paid registration side, consider what your registration fee will be and how many people you will need to recruit to be profitable given all expenses. From the sponsorship side, build a sales pipeline so you can begin to estimate how much support you can expect from advertisers. What existing advertisers would like to have face-time with your audience? Or do you need to build new relationships to support your event?

Also, consider how you will involve sponsors in your event in order to increase the value of their sponsorship. (See more on this in "The Sponsor Experience" section below.)

## DESIGN YOUR EVENT PROGRAM & EXPERIENCE

The program and experience that you design for your event will follow from the high-level objectives you outlined for your ideal attendee. For many publishers, just like the content they publish in their magazines or on their websites, education and information are important components of a successful event. However, the value of an event goes beyond just information. A lot of publishers will say that their events are where their magazines "come to life." It might sound cliché, but the social component of events cannot be understated, whether you're serving professionals in a B2B setting or consumers in regional or special interest arenas.

### Constantly Improve the Experience

Each year, the [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\)](#) holds its annual [NACE Conference & Expo](#), drawing nearly 2500 career development and recruiting professionals from around the country. Megan Ogden, NACE Director of Meetings & Events, oversees everything from programming and hotels, to food, beverage, and sponsorships. Ogden says that conference attendees show up for the educational content and networking opportunities. The conference is a rare opportunity for career development professionals to share best practices first-hand and build valuable business relationships.

# Supporting Your Event

Fortunately, publishers already have many of the tools and expertise needed to put on an event. They have the content and audience experts in their editors, and they have the marketing capabilities in audience development and marketing departments. Let's look at a few of the key support areas publishers will need for launching an event.

**Event Staff** – This is an area where a publisher might need to recruit new talent to find someone with experience securing hotels and venues, negotiating food and beverage contracts, and coordinating a wide variety of tasks, including entertainment, audio-visual, logistics (sponsor booths, etc.), and much, much more.

**Editorial Support** – This is handled differently from one publishing company to the next. In some cases, editors handle all of the event programming, including session development, speaker outreach, and live MC-ing of the event. At other organizations, editors act in more of a consultative role, advising on topics and speakers but leaving the logistics to an event programmer.

**Marketing** – Publishers should be able to utilize their existing marketing departments to market their events. Marketers should work closely with editorial staff or the program director to understand and market the key value proposition of the event to the right personas.

**Technology** – Many events can be managed with a lightweight event registration management platform like CVENT. Of course, depending on the complexity of your event or attendee scheduling requirements, more technology requirements may be needed. Publishers will also need an event site for attendees to learn about their event, whether a standalone site or a portal on their existing site.



“Online networking and phone calls and virtual conferences are useful, however we’ve found that there’s no replacement for face-to-face networking,” says Ogden.

Given the line of work that recruiting and career counseling professionals are in, they really enjoy socializing, says Ogden. In turn, it’s important that the event program is built in such a way that it encourages peer-to-peer interactions and that attendees’ time at the event isn’t over-structured.

One example of how NACE fosters the social aspect of an event is by holding “campfire conversations.” Last year the association held loosely facilitated conversations around a set of 15 topics amongst small groups of people, and served s’mores and hot chocolate. It was a hit, says Ogden.

This also serves as a good example of how constantly focusing and improving the attendee experience is crucial to the continued success of an event. “We focus on the attendee experience – from start to finish – everything from the time they get to registration to the closing speaker,” says Ogden. “What’s the wow factor we can give them? And we try to refresh the program each year so it’s not stale.”

As a result, NACE conference registration has been growing 3-5% annually and has a high repeat attendee rate. Somewhere around 70% of attendees each year have attended in the past five years, which is quite a testament to the event in the budget-strapped world of higher education.

ATTENDEES GATHERED AT THE 2017 NACE CONFERENCE + EXPO IN LAS VEGAS.

This speaks to the need, as Andrew Davis indicated, for publishers to find a sustainable event model. “The event has to evolve,” says Davis. “The events that don’t have a good attendee return rate repeat what they did before – the same exact venue, the stage looks the same.”

### **Design the Experience Around Your Personas**

The program for an event is really one in the same as marketing an event. The specific sessions, speakers, activities, or product demos you build into the program will attract the people that are interested in those topics, so it’s crucial that program and attendee goals are aligned.

Bauler says that attendees for the AACN’s NTI conference are motivated greatly by the educational opportunities, where nurses earn education credits they need to stay accredited. Still, it is important for the AACN that the “right” people attend the annual conference – those in a position to purchase healthcare equipment. Bauler says that AACN goes to great lengths to design a program of sessions and speakers that will attract the right mix of attendees, in some cases finding speakers from niche subject areas. Similarly, the publisher could develop a special educational track if it needed to attract nurses with a specific concentration.

In addition to education, Bauler says the other key to AACN’s success is celebrating their event attendees. “We say we want to educate and celebrate nurses at our conferences. We try to celebrate the profession of nursing to make the nurses excited about their chosen profession and about going back to their day-to-day jobs. The conference is the oasis to get away, get together with peers, and network.”

### **Space & Place: Consider Venue and Geography**

You could hold your event nearly anywhere, but there are a couple of key considerations publishers should make when choosing a location and venue.

#### **GEOGRAPHY**

Above all, it’s crucial that attendees make it to your event. The more attendees you have in one place, the better chance of success you’ll have. Is your audience concentrated in one area? If you’re a B2B publisher focused on the financial market, New York City would be a great location to find a lot of potential attendees. If you’re not based where your attendees are, will you travel to them or ask them to come to you?



WITH EDUCATION AND NETWORKING KEY REASONS FOR ATTENDANCE, NACE IS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO EVOLVE HOW IT APPROACHES BOTH.

**“We focus on the attendee experience – from start to finish – everything from the time they get to registration to the closing speaker.”**

– Megan Ogden, Director of Meetings & Events, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)

“Convenience is a huge factor in determining your audience’s willingness to participate,” says Davis. “Attendees will ask themselves, ‘How many travel steps do I need to take?’ which limits the potential locations.” This is why so many U.S. events are held near major travel hubs, in a half-way point like Chicago, or on either coast.

On the other hand, if there’s a compelling reason to hold your event in a less convenient location, it could increase attendees’ willingness to burden travel. For example, maybe you’re trying to get your attendees out of their day-to-day lives and provide a luxury getaway event, so a trip to Vail, Colorado is justified.

## VENUE

Andrew Davis has been to a lot of events and what he’s learned is that people tend to underestimate how important the venue is. The venue should match your brand, says Davis. “A lot of events put you to a city and throw you in a ballroom for three days. The best events I’ve attended get you out of the ballroom and inspire you to think.”

A lot of non-traditional venues are opening up their doors to events, so publishers should be creative when considering the setting for their rendezvous. However, they should also be mindful that venues accustomed to holding events know the business and will have the operational support that a publisher needs.

Both geography and venue can be important factors in your marketing plan as you attempt to showcase what the overall event experience will entail for attendees.

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— Andrew Davis,  
Author, Speaker & Events Expert

AUTHOR, KEYNOTE SPEAKER, AND EVENT EXPERT ANDREW DAVIS ADDRESSES AN AUDIENCE AT ONE OF HIS MANY ANNUAL SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS.



## The Sponsor Experience

Though attendee experience is paramount, the sponsor experience should not be overlooked. Publishers should look to established events for common sponsor packages and pricing in their markets. But just as with the attendee experience, publishers should strive to be innovative when it comes to sponsor experience.

Andrew Davis suggests looking for ways that sponsors can be integrated into the programming in creative ways while still maintaining editorial oversight. Davis says he has seen people get “visibly angry and complain in the middle of the presentation” when a sponsor’s presentation became too much of a sales pitch.

Davis points to a successful example gleaned at the [Rakuten Marketing Affiliate Summit](#), where one of the most important components of their community coming together was networking opportunities, as opposed to speaker sessions. When Davis went to take the stage to speak, he noticed the room was relatively empty, and he was spooked. The event director, however, was thrilled. The empty ballroom meant that people were taking part in meetings with sponsors. “They booked eight hours of meetings over two days in all the rooms,” says Davis. “Not only did it increase revenue but vendor sponsors and attendees were happy.”

Similarly, to ensure their exhibitors are receiving the engagement they desire, the AACN has educational sessions on their exhibit floor. Bauler says the exhibit floor has 43 theaters presenting 190 approved topics in 530 30-minute accredited sessions on the expo floor.

And it’s also clear from speaking to event directors that publishers should never underestimate what a sponsorship opportunity looks like. Everything from lanyards, to individual meals, to WiFi, to happy hours, you can slap a sponsor logo on nearly anything for a price. You just have to get creative and be willing to customize a sponsor’s experience.

### ADD IT UP

Putting on an event is a big endeavor and costs can add up quickly. Publishers should make sure to produce a thorough budget of every last cost and revenue line, with conservative numbers, to see if launching an event is financially possible. And make sure to consider your staff’s time. Time spent on events is time not spent on other efforts, which will likely have a financial cost of its own. 📊

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