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Moments of Impact

Are you getting the most out of your special effects? Here's how to ensure every dollar counts

By Rachel Globus

For all the different tricks and technologies they use, special effects experts can agree on one thing: They don't like the term "special effects." And if there's one thing planners should learn from them, it's that.

Steven P. Simmons, a certified meeting professional and president and CEO of StagingOptics, prefers to talk about "moments of impact." For Kevin Bilida, owner of TLC Creative Productions, "exclamation marks" is the mot juste.

It's more than just a semantic shift, according to Simmons. "We don't know what we want to do, but we want it to be cool" is usually how the discussion starts with new clients, he says. "They don't know why, they just want it to be powerful." But Simmons coaches planners to look at special effects in a different way: as moments of impact that support your core mission objectives. Then, the discussion about which effects to use and how can be framed in a more targeted fashion.

"If we spend a dollar and it gets us closer to achieving our core mission objectives, then it's an investment," he explains. "If it doesn't get us closer, it's an expense."

Strategic Special Effects

Jeremy Vargus, managing partner of Hollywood, Calif.-based RPI Entertainment & Media Group, adds that the down economy makes this perspective even more important. Special effects should incorporate your message and create a branding experience with the audience, he says. Anything else could come across as irresponsible.

There's another reason to think of special effects as part of a broad palette of tools — including décor, food & beverage and other event elements — that you use to achieve your objectives: If they're an after-thought, you're missing an opportunity to maximize their impact.

For example, says Bilida, if you add in a low-lying fog system late in the planning stages, your entranceway may not work for it. However, if your special effects decisions are an integral part of your planning process from early on, you would design the hallway to maximize the effect's impact.

Moreover, even that decision should be evaluated with the ultimate objectives in mind. "Low-lying fog down-lit with blue lighting, speakers along the ground making a wonderful swirling sound, some LCD or plasma screens as you're walking down this hallway — take all that away and all it is is a hallway with carpet," says ▶



ing experience and then switching it seamlessly to the [CEOs of the Big Three automakers] stepping out of the vehicles,” says Lewis Watts. “So it went from a virtual experience to a real-life experience.”

{analysis} Special effects supported the ultimate goal of making a strong statement with the opening ceremony and memorably integrating the sponsors. “It was very impactful and definitely achieved our objectives,” says Lewis Watts. “More importantly, they made it fit within our budget. When you think special effects, people think it’s really going to cost a lot. But there’s way to do it and make it an investment within your event.”

Right: RPI Entertainment’s effects were key to the success of the Premier Inc. ‘Breakthroughs’ event. The RPI team created a customized show that fused together several elements such as the ‘Laser Bender’ performer, a magical floating light bulb that levitated and traveled 100 feet over the audience, a giant 20 foot Laser Balloon that featured customized Premier animated images and core objectives. The show also served up aerial laser and lighting effects that were choreographed to a customized musical soundtrack created by the RPI team.


Case Study Setting the Scene for ‘Breakthroughs’

{the event} Welcome and Alliance Update, 2008 Breakthroughs Conference and Exhibition

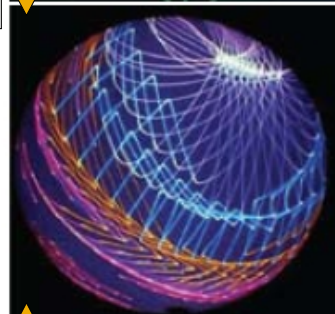
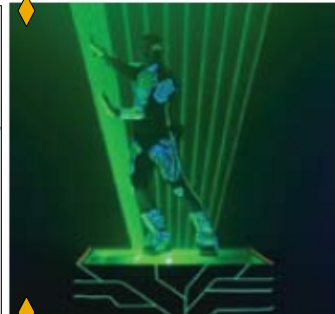
{core mission objectives} The opening general session of Premier Inc.’s Breakthroughs conference is the culmination of a months-long process of setting the scene for innovation to take place. Mailers and other literature start that process, which is carried through on-site in the look of registration, the cyber café and other areas of the conference. The opening plenary kick-starts the “breakthroughs” and reinforces the conference tagline “Transforming Healthcare Together.”

{special effects’ role} The 8 a.m. show started off strong with a European performer called the “laser bender” brought in by RPI Entertainment. Laser beams coming out of the floor bent in his hands, seemingly defying the laws of physics. A custom light bulb then levitated over the stage, carrying the audience’s attention to the back of the room, where a giant 20-foot-diameter globe flashed key branding messages for the conference. Then attention went back to the stage for a laser finale; finally, the CEO

appeared out of a vortex of laser light.

{analysis} The themes of transformation and light, carried through the performer, light bulb and laser show, signified core messaging: breakthrough ideas and shining light on replicable best practices, innovations and success stories that would help transform care. “This was not only a wow factor, but a factor that people said, ‘Oh, ok, I get it’ — meaning the purpose of the upcoming days — says Mark Bellinger, senior director of administrative services for Premier. He measures the effectiveness of the conference in attendance. “I can see a big ROI,” he says, pointing to the conference’s growing attendance, even in a down economy. It is aimed at middle management at hospitals, such as materials managers, quality improvement directors and HR executives. “Those folks are so excited they’re starting to invite their CEOs,” he says. 

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Photos courtesy: RPI Entertainment & Media Group

•**Thanks E.S. for the great feature!** RPI’s ‘Show Wizards’ wanted to add: “This was a challenging production on many levels; tech, engineering, timing and endless refining-n-tweaking of illusion-modis-operandi. But it was **absolutely worth** it when we witnessed the massive crowd of [barely awake] attendees shuffle into their seats at 7:33 am—assuming another *action-packed* PowerPoint lecture. Then... lights-out and *Go!* **Eyes opened, jaws began to drop** [and some coffees too], **big smiles appeared** *in-ane* of visual spectacle that unfolded and grew and engulfed that audience! **The room’s energy levels quickly zipped from a 1 to an 11!**—*well worth all the effort and a very proud moment for our entire team!*”—S.S.