Five Ways to Drive Higher Event Satisfaction: A Data-Driven Approach

An nTAG White Paper

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A Data-Driven Approach

What makes for a successful event? Is event success something you can guide, manage, and replicate or is it more or less out of your control? Are there tangible steps you can take to ensure strong results or is event outcome determined by some elusive element at the whim of chance or fate? At one time or another, almost all event owners grapple with questions like these in their effort to design and execute successful business gatherings. What if you could demystify event satisfaction by pinpointing and controlling key success factors to ensure that attendees return year after year?

In this white paper, nTAG presents a data-driven approach for driving higher attendee satisfaction at your next event. Leveraging data collected from multiple events, we outline and describe five key factors that significantly influence attendee's satisfaction level. In addition, we present implications for success and make recommendations for designing events that promote and facilitate the kinds of positive experiences that lead to higher attendee satisfaction.

Laying the Groundwork

For the purposes of this paper, we defined event success as the achievement of high attendee satisfaction. In order to identify the factors that drive high attendee satisfaction, nTAG conducted an in-depth analysis of multiple metrics using actual data collected from dozens of meetings and events held by large enterprises, including Fortune 1000 clients. We used this analysis to determine the activities, behaviors, and attitudes that correlate with very high event satisfaction and translated them into five data-driven best practices for achieving event success.

The findings presented in this white paper consist of preliminary research and we will continue to collect event data for ongoing validation of our conclusions. While all events are different and correlation does not necessarily equate to causality, we believe the strength and consistency of our early findings lend merit to our recommendations.

Determining Who Is Really Satisfied

The first challenge we face is how to determine event satisfaction. While a survey is an appropriate tool for measuring attendee satisfaction, our experience suggests many event organizers set too low a bar in determining who is really satisfied. Specifically, many event owners consider a satisfaction rating of "excellent" or "good" (or the equivalent top two answers on a five point scale) to be a positive result, while most attendees will almost never give a score that is

anything less than good for overall satisfaction. In fact, in the most recent 12 events for which we collected data, 90% or more of attendees rated the event as good or excellent (see Figure 1). Applying the too-low "good or excellent" standard would suggest that all 12 events were equally successful. In our work to understand what drives attendee satisfaction, we use a higher bar to determine the group of people who were truly satisfied – namely, those who rated their satisfaction as a excellent. We suggest you do the same.
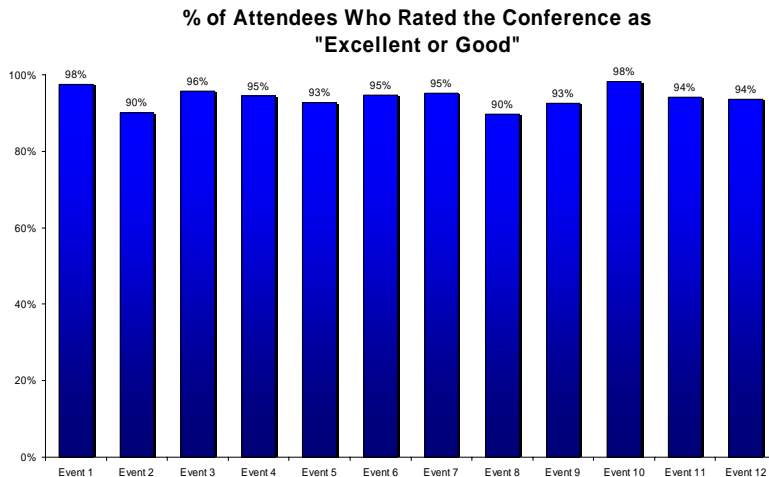

Figure 1 – This table shows the percentage of attendees who rated each event "Excellent" or "Good". Across all 12 events, the average was over 90%.
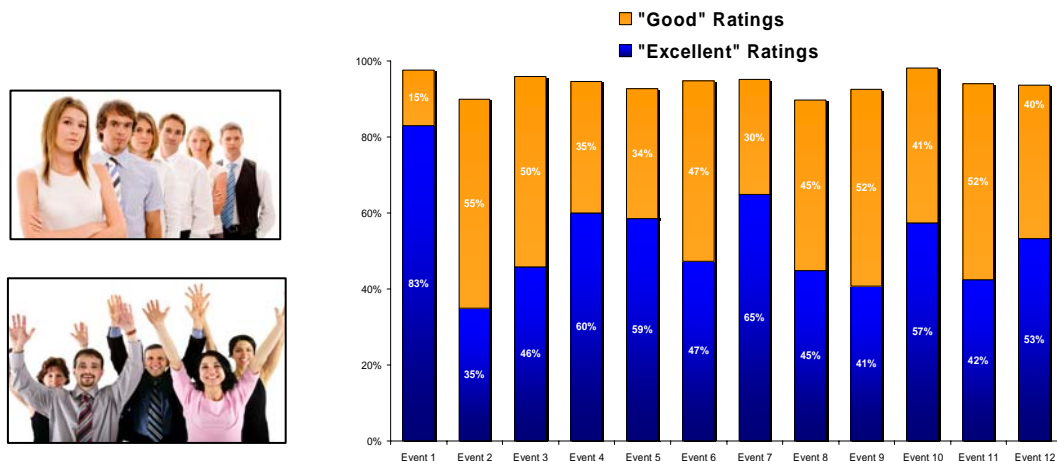

Figure 2 – Breaking out the percentage of attendees who rated the events "Excellent" versus those who rated them as "Good" revealed that satisfaction varied significantly among these 12 events.

To illustrate this point, compare Event 1 and Event 2. The data in Figure 1 suggests they were similarly successful in terms of attendee satisfaction. Figure 2, however, shows a very different reality. The

breakdown reveals that Event 1 attendees were over twice as likely to rate the event as "Excellent" compared to Event 2 attendees.

Unlocking the Mysteries of Event Satisfaction

Having arrived at a clear definition for event satisfaction, we're ready to move on to the next step: finding out what leads to event satisfaction. For that purpose, we identified two distinct attendee populations: the "Sats" (satisfied attendees who rated the event as "Excellent") and the "Grumps" (less satisfied attendees who gave the event a rating of "Good" or lower).

What accounts for the different satisfaction ratings of the Sats versus the Grumps? Even more importantly, what can be done to increase the ratio of Sats to Grumps at upcoming events? Asking attendees what they found satisfying is a good start, but it's usually of limited value because, in general, people have trouble accurately attributing their impressions to specific activities or experiences. For our analysis, we took a different approach by collecting and analyzing data related to attendee experiences, behaviors, and attitudes in order to identify those that correlate with higher event satisfaction levels. The data suggests that these two populations had distinctly different experiences at the event—both in terms of their interactions with others and their level of engagement in sessions and activities—that may have contributed to their level of satisfaction. This process uncovered five key factors that correlated to event success:

1. Networking activity
2. Session experiences
3. Executive engagement
4. Meaningful interactions
5. Early affect

In the sections that follow, nTAG presents the data that supports these findings and presents implications and recommendations for designing events that offer attendees a more satisfying event experience, thereby yielding many more Sats than Grumps.

Five Key Drivers of Attendee Satisfaction

1. Networking

Statistical Findings

The data suggests distinct differences between the networking experiences of the Grumps versus the Sats. As a group, the Grumps were disconnected from the event community. They had fewer interactions over the course of the event and their interactions tended to be with other "non-central" attendees. The Sats, on the other hand, felt plugged into the event community. They met more people and had more interactions with attendees who were key connectors. Figure 3 shows the average "betweenness centrality" per attendee, a metric that indicates how significant a role a person played in "connecting" people at an event[1]. As the data demonstrates, the Sats were on average almost twice as "central" than the Grumps.
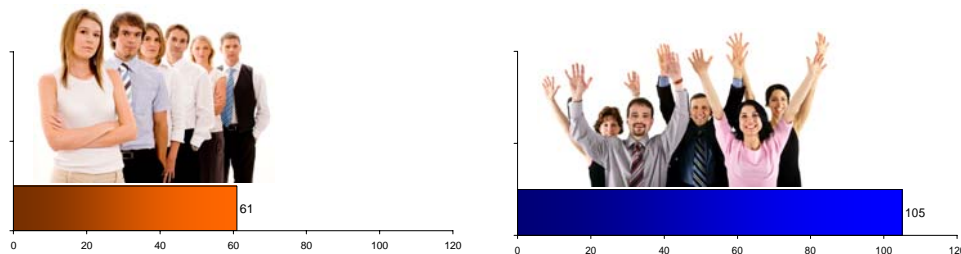

Figure 3 - Average "Betweenness Centrality" per Attendee at Customer Event X: Grumps (at left) vs. Sats (at right).

Implications & Recommendations

Given that connectedness correlated with higher attendee satisfaction, how can you promote better networking at your next event? First, make it easy for attendees to circulate and engage in meaningful conversations. Anticipate which attendees may feel disconnected and build programs to introduce them to event veterans. For example, use registration data to determine which clients are attending your user conference for the first time and invite them to a welcome reception designed to introduce them to several long-time customers who know more people at the event. Design incentives for encouraging repeat attendees to mix with newcomers. Finally, monitor networking activity and intervene if necessary to ensure that all attendees are interacting with the right people and feel like connected members of the event community.

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[1] For a more complete definition of "betweenness centrality" and other social networking terms and research, read "An Introduction to Social Networking Analysis", http://www.orgnet.com/sna.html .

2. Session Experiences

Statistical Findings

According to nTAG's research, strong reactions—positive or negative—to event sessions affected attendee satisfaction scores. A net positive session experience, calculated by taking the total strongly positive experiences and subtracting out the negative ones, was a better indicator of overall event satisfaction than a simple average session score. This suggests that it is important to have at least a few sessions that really "wow" the audience and leave attendees with a favorable overall impression of their session experiences. Figure 4 shows the average net positive session (number of positive sessions subtracted by the number of negative sessions) per attendee at a customer event. The data revealed that the Grumps attended a slightly higher number of disappointing sessions than great ones. For the Sats, dynamic and memorable sessions outnumbered the duds to yield a net positive session experience.
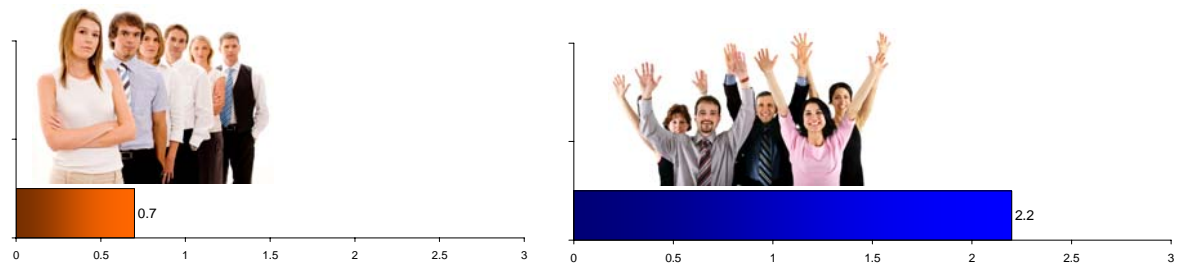

Figure 4 – The Average Net Positive Session (# positive sessions - # negative sessions) per Attendee at Customer Event X.

Implications & Recommendations

If you're looking to turn more Grumps into Sats, try making your sessions more memorable. Invest more time, money, and energy on a few highly relevant sessions that will really stand out. For example, when considering budget trade offs, sacrifice quantity for quality by hiring one great speaker over two good ones. If budget is not a primary issue, consider providing a variety of sessions that are narrowly focused and highly relevant to subsets of attendees, rather than a single session that will have wider but less intense appeal. Engage attendees with interactivity; incorporate audience polling, surveys, and Q&A that encourage active participation and boost the fun factor. Finally, don't be afraid to take some chances. Conservative presentations tend to be more forgettable, while provocative ones make a more lasting impression.

3. Executive Engagement

Statistical Findings

Our data analysis revealed a correlation between face time with key executives/thought leaders, and high attendee satisfaction. Conversations with executives or industry thought leaders make a strong impression on attendees and tend to be remembered when they evaluate their event experience. Compared to the Sats, the Grumps had considerably fewer face-to-face interactions with executives—an experience that correlated with lower satisfaction scores. As shown in Figure 5, the Sats averaged .5 interactions with executives per attendee, while the Grumps had virtually none at all. Furthermore, the length of time executives spent with each attendee had marginal effect on satisfaction. This suggests that instead of concerning themselves with the duration or quality of each interaction, executives should focus more on interacting with many attendees during networking sessions. We recommend that event organizers encourage executives and thought leaders to spend time mingling with attendees after their scheduled presentations and to stick around for networking sessions.
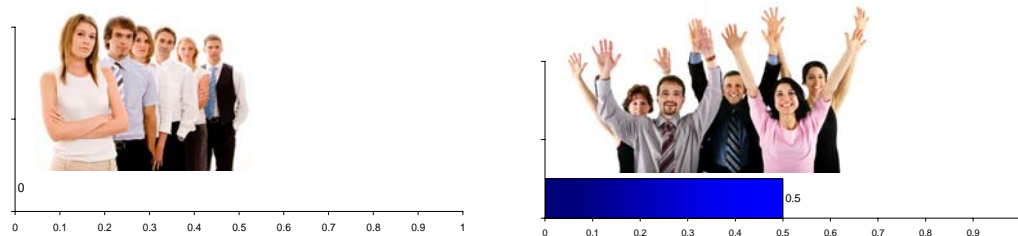

Figure 5 – Average # Interactions with Executives per Attendee at Customer Event X.

Implications & Recommendations

Executive engagement delivers big pay-off in terms of attendee satisfaction. Before any event, get executives' buy-in to ensure their prominent presence and active participation in event activities. Emphasize their potential impact on driving higher event satisfaction, and once they're on board, make sure you have enough executives in circulation at key networking venues. Identify the likely Grumps early on and invite them to a special gathering, such as a "Breakfast with the Executives" to provide a more focused networking opportunity. What's more, monitor executive interactions at the event, and if necessary, ask them to engage more with attendees.

4.   Meaningful Interactions/Card Exchange

Statistical Findings

Attendees tend to exchange cards only after making what they perceive to be a useful connection with enough potential business value to warrant follow-up. Do more meaningful interactions correlate with higher attendee satisfaction? According to our findings, the answer is yes. Our data reveals that, at one customer event, those attendees who exchanged at least three business cards were 50% more likely to wind up as Sats. As shown in Figure 6, the Grumps, on average, left the event having exchanged only about half as many cards as the Sats. Since fewer business card exchanges equates to fewer meaningful interactions, it's no wonder the Grumps reported lower satisfaction with their event experience.
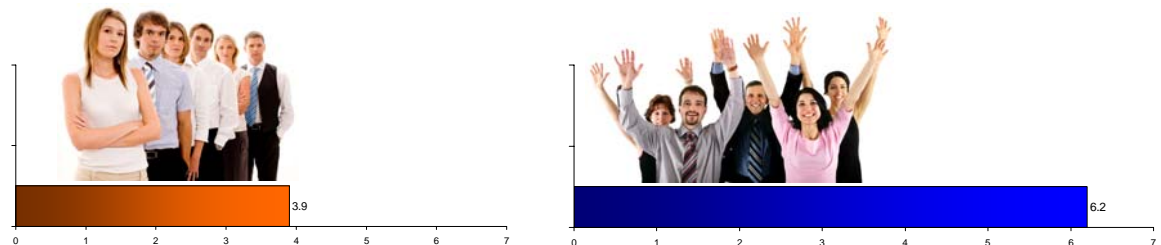

Figure 7 — The Average # of Card Exchanges per Attendee at Customer Event X.

Implications & Recommendations

Maximizing the number of meaningful attendee interactions starts by getting the right people to come to your event. In invitations and promotions, set expectations correctly to ensure that only those who find relevance in the event content and community will attend. When designing your event, incorporate opportunities, like "Birds of a Feather" sessions, that facilitate connections among attendees with similar interests. Provide registered attendees with tools for connecting with people before and at the event. And when these individuals do connect, make it as easy as possible to share contact information.

5. Early Affect

Statistical Findings
A final correlation identified in our research was that those who ended up as Grumps were almost twice as likely to **start** the event with negative attitudes about key issues. No matter how many great sessions they attended or how many meaningful interactions they had, they were less likely to be highly satisfied with the event.
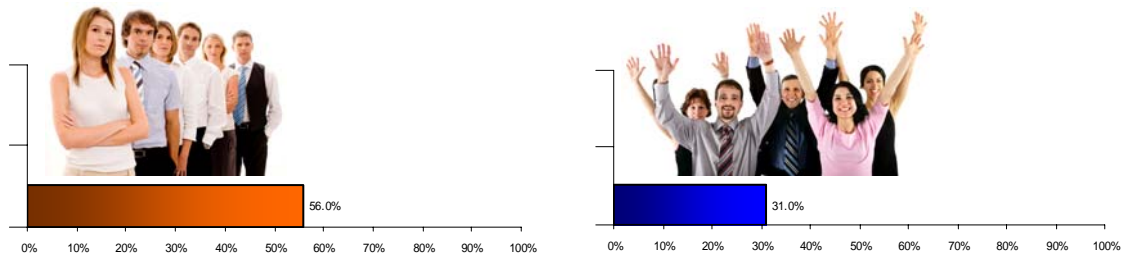

Figure 8 – Percentage of attendees with low early affect score at Customer Event Y.

Implications & Recommendations
Just as pre-testing for attendee knowledge at a training event has become a common industry practice, we recommend that pre-testing for attitude be adopted as a routine part of event planning. Before the event, survey your registrants to determine if there are issues causing them to harbor negative attitudes. Intervene as early as possible with sessions that specifically address the underlying source of dissatisfaction. For example, if some registrants complained of customer service issues, set up a breakout session led by customer services executives. Continue to survey your attendees each day of the event to see if those with negative "early affect" have experienced attitude shifts which put them on the road to being Sats.

The nTAG Event Data Management System

In this paper, we've presented five practical, data-driven ways to improve event success. But how can you put our recommendations into practice? The nTAG Event Data Management (EDM) system helps companies gain greater value from meetings and events. Built around the first interactive name badge, the nTAG system enables you to automate, measure and improve all aspects of meetings and events— on site and in real time. It provides powerful, innovative capabilities to multiply the effectiveness of any business gathering and driver higher attendee satisfaction. These include:

Networking- nTAG's networking capabilities facilitate interactions among attendees. Networking games get attendees talking, making the right connections, and sharing experiences for a livelier and more satisfying event experience. nTAG makes it easy for event organizers to monitor networking activity in real time, enabling them to take action, if necessary, to increase the level of interaction. Plus, nTAG's comprehensive network activity reports detail the total number of interactions as well as the number of interactions between specific participant groups, helping event owners to determine if event networking objectives were achieved.

Business Card Exchange - The nTAG system simplifies the exchange of complete, accurate contact information between attendees. When two attendees meet, each nTAG automatically logs the name of the other person and displays it at the top of the nTAG menu. Once the name is logged and displayed, nTAG enables the exchange of contact information with a single click. A touch-screen keyboard allows attendees to annotate the contact information for easier follow-up. After the event, attendees receive a link to their personalized *myntag* web page, where they can download contacts or request receipt via email.

Session Interactivity - nTAG helps boost attendee satisfaction by enabling more engaging and memorable presentations. With nTAG's interactivity features, attendees participate more, have more fun, and get more out of their event experience. Real-time audience response can be used for polling, surveys, brainstorming or Q&A. Audience members make their selections on the nTAG display, and because polling takes place in real time, responses are immediately available to the presenter for display and discussion. Results can also be downloaded to CRM or other systems for use after the event.

Automated Surveys and Real-Time Measurement – nTAG facilitates the collection of valuable attendee information and feedback via electronic surveys. Depending on your objectives, surveys can be sent to all attendees or a targeted group that matches a certain profile. Best of all, nTAG survey results are tabulated and made

available in real time so event organizers and presenters can act on the information right away. nTAG monitors all event activity, empowering event owners to assess performance versus objectives—both during and after the event. The solution provides a comprehensive view into all meeting activities and results, as well as access to the data and tools required to calculate ROI. nTAG even enables year-to-year comparisons and measures event results against industry benchmarks, helping event owners to identify underperforming areas and improve event design over time.

About nTAG Interactive, Inc.

nTAG Interactive is the leader in Event Data Management (EDM). The nTAG real-time event data management system helps event organizers and participants to achieve their event objectives—business development, education motivation, market research, customer loyalty, team building, and brand promotion. Built around the first interactive name badge, the nTAG system provides advanced tools for targeted networking, session interactivity, and lead generation. It also delivers never-before-available data for marketing and ROI analysis, and it automates on-site logistics (attendance tracking, surveys, messaging, agenda publication and more). nTAG has been used at events for IBM, Procter and Gamble, Lucent, WellPoint, MasterCard, General Electric, Johnson and Johnson, and many others. To learn more about how nTAG can help make your next event a success, please call 877-NTAG-YES or visit nTAG on the web at www.ntag.com.