

Give Your Members the Celebrity Experience

Rolling out the red carpet isn't always about Hollywood A-listers and paparazzi flashbulbs. You can offer members star treatment by consistently making them feel special and important.

By Donna Cutting

Imagine a world where red carpets were rolled out for you wherever you went, where people greeted you by name, with a smile and boundless enthusiasm. Imagine feeling loved, wanted, and expected everywhere you traveled. Imagine a life where the people you did business with knew you inside and out and bent over backward to cater to your personal preferences. Imagine ...

Does such a world exist?

You bet it does. It's called Hollywood, and it's reserved for an elite few.

Who wouldn't want to be treated as a celebrity? Everywhere they go, they are made to feel special, unique, and important. They live a glamorous life of private jets, over-the-top parties, and the best of everything.

While these privileges are reserved for the likes of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, savvy leaders can take a cue from Hollywood and grow their association membership by giving their members and guests a little star treatment of their own. When you consistently make each individual member feel important and special—truly like a

people like Denzel Washington and the rest of us? For Denzel, whatever question he asks, the answer is yes. Then those around him buzz about figuring out the how.

Scott Graham, CEO of Xtreme Personal Assistant and Concierge Services, is used to unusual requests from his celebrity clients. His promise: If you can imagine it, we can deliver it—as long as it's moral, ethical, and legal. So when a client asked for a pepperoni pizza to be delivered that evening, hot and fresh from the oven, to his flat in London from a very specific pizza place—a pizza place that happens to be located in Chicago—Graham didn't blink. He and his team got creative and

when, by using a little ingenuity, the answer could be yes? The next time you find yourself giving the “sorry but it's our policy” excuse, ask yourself if you actually can find a solution with a little creativity.

Stephanie Carter of the Association for Play Therapy says, “Our office policy is to never say no to a member unless it is the very last option. When asked for something we feel we can't provide, we answer the question with a question: ‘And you want that because?’ This requires the member to reveal their actual need. Once that is known, we do our best to satisfy it with whatever we can provide. This policy has resulted in reversing the

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star—they will come back for more and bring friends.

You might be thinking that this is impossible. But it's not. It doesn't take a Brad Pitt-sized budget to make someone feel like a star. It's not about expensive restaurants and exotic travel locations. It's about the choice you have to make your members feel important and special—one member at a time.

Here are a few ideas to help you give your members (and future members) the celebrity experience.

Just Say Yes

What's the real difference between

figured out the how. They put a pizza oven on a private jet, flew a concierge and someone from the pizza place, with all the special ingredients, over to London. As the plane was landing, they stuck the pizza in the oven. As the wheels touched down, they slapped it in a box, hopped in the waiting limo, and arrived at the celebrity's doorstep in time for dinner.

Was it the most expensive pizza on the face of the planet? Absolutely! Yet, there is something important the rest of us can learn from the creativity Graham and his team used to meet that challenge. The question to ask is, how often do we say no to challenges

image of our office and tightening our bond with members.”

Roll Out the Red Carpet

Every spring since 2002, the employees of the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, California, spend weeks in preparation to host the Academy Awards. They roll out the long red carpet, put up velvet ropes, and hang drapes to cover the storefronts that usually line the grand staircase. On the big night, celebrities step out of the limos and are greeted by an official greeter. As their names are announced, 600 fans in the bleacher seats collectively roar in appreciation. Photographers line up to take

their photos and reporters rave over their accomplishments, asking “Who are you wearing?” and exclaiming “You look ravishing!”

Without all that pomp and circumstance, the ceremony wouldn't feel the same. The occasion is far too significant for an ordinary arrival.

What about the welcome you give your new members and prospective members? Do they have the impression you are excited to have them join you, or that they are just one more anonymous addition to your organization? One of the best ways to roll out the red carpet for new members is to immediately engage them in your organization. Aside from recognizing new members at their first meeting, in the newsletter, and with welcome phone calls, the Arizona Sunbelt Chapter of Meeting Professionals International assigns a “sidekick” to members who request it. The sidekick is a mentor who will help them get started on the road to what they hope to achieve in MPI.

Better yet, if you want to know how to improve the welcome you give to new members, survey your current ones. Ask them, “On a scale of one to five, how welcome did you feel when you joined our association?” If the answer is anything less than a five, ask them, “What could we have done to make it a five?” Then you'll know exactly what must be done to better welcome your new and prospective members.

Once the red carpet is out, make sure it stays out. Haven't seen or heard from an active member in a while? Be sure to pick up the phone and ask where he or she has been, so he or she don't feel forgotten. “Unlike a red carpet that only comes out on occasion, the red carpet is glued to the floor,” says Jeni Stamas, managing director of the International Association of Outsourcing Professionals. “It is inherent in the way we treat people with respect and continually refine our membership benefits.”

Give Them Star Power

With celebrity comes power. Lots of it. The higher your star rises, the more people will listen to you. A-list stars such as Tom Cruise, Will Smith, and Reese Witherspoon, who can influence what movies you see based on their names alone, are given a great deal of creative control over their projects. Celebrities have voice, choice, influence, and power. If you want to give your members a true celebrity experience, consider giving them a larger voice in the direction of your association.

As Dan Maddux, executive director of the American Payroll Association, says, “Make every decision from the point of view of your members.” Better yet, involve everyone in the decision-making process when it comes to the direction of your association. Gather your members together—in person or online—and ask them the following three questions: What do we start doing? What do we stop doing? What do we continue doing?

When Memphis Area Association of Realtors members asked for the creation of a consumer-awareness campaign about the strength and viability of the Memphis-area real estate market, MAAR's leadership listened and, on the fly, carved enough out of the organization's budget to design and execute “Hop off the Fence”—a campaign designed to position MAAR as a community-minded and expert source for consumers. This above-and-beyond response to member needs has been so well received that sister associations across the country have asked about licensing the campaign in their own markets.

By using technology and social-networking platforms, many association executives are able to encourage more regular participation of members than ever before. Andy Stegges, CIO of the Risk and Insurance Management Society, revamped the association's website and built a social media-based platform to increase member satisfaction and encourage member

participation. Developing its Director 2.0 (a cross between Facebook and LinkedIn) has enabled RIMS members to better connect with their peers and access and contribute to industry resources such as a streaming video library, a wiki-glossary, and more.

The Association of Corporate Counsel has a blog that acts as an open forum for members and visitors to offer comments and insights on issues of interest to the profession. ACC staff are also required to call at least six members each month to ask for personal insight on their ACC membership, how the association can improve, and whether there are resources members have a need for that are not provided. The feedback is gathered and then directly applied to enhancing existing resources, developing new tools, and improving member communication.

When you find ways to better engage your membership and give them star power, you will keep them connected to your association.

Give Them Opportunities to Shine

The celebrity experience includes being in the spotlight and shining brightly while you're there. Go out of your way to give interested members their moments of fame, and equip them with the knowledge and tools they need to make the most of the experience.

When Maddux took over as executive director of the American Payroll Association in 1992, the organization was in financial crisis and was operating out of a rented office. Since then, the membership of APA has tripled to 23,000, and APA now owns its administration building as well as several state-of-the-art training facilities. According to Maddux and other organization leaders, APA exists to take people who have been unrecognized, unnoticed, and underpaid for most of their careers and give them the skills they need to shine. For example, as with many associations, the members of APA are offered opportunities

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to speak at their annual congress. However, those who volunteer to speak are offered, at no cost to them, a full day of speaking school by world-class speaker and presentation coach Patricia Fripp. In addition, Fripp gives private coaching to the president and incoming president of APA as well as the association's man or woman of the year. In this way, Maddux ensures their confidence and their stellar success at the podium.

Members at The Luxury Marketing Council of Florida become "Fellows" by presenting at a meeting. Chairman Christopher Ramey is publishing a book that includes their pictures, bio information, and takeaways from their presentations. Ramey also subscribes to PR lists such as www.helpareporter.com and reads them religiously, looking for quote opportunities for each member of LMC.

Elizabeth Cowels, who works with the School Nutrition Association says, "Our members are the spokespersons for our group. From a PR perspective, SNA's policy is that nobody tells their story better than their members. We learn about their stories and their programs and schedule TV, radio, and print interviews with members."

Create Movie Moments One Member at a Time

Remember when Tom Cruise said to Renee Zellweger "You complete me?" Remember the scene in *The Sixth Sense* when we all realized ... Well, I won't spoil it for those who haven't seen it, but you know the one I mean. Remember when Sandy and Danny finally got together and drove off in *Grease*? Of course you do—because these were wow moments in the movies that stay with us forever. Create those kinds of wow moments—or movie moments—for your members, and they will be buzzing to others about how your association makes them feel like a star.

For instance, Jeanne Perdue says, "I'm a 28-year member of the Society of Petroleum Engineers, and the annual awards banquet the group does each year is like the Academy Awards. They use spotlights, videotaped comments, a booming VOG [Voice of God], drum rolls, and acceptance speeches. I was honored at the 1992 Annual Awards Banquet with the Young Member Outstanding Service Award ... and I know I felt like such a star!"

When Maddux from the American Payroll Association was given the presidential suite in a hotel where his

conference was being held, he secretly switched rooms with the president of the association. She was in delighted shock and gave parties in her room all week long. She didn't know who was responsible until Maddux's laundry was delivered to the room. Now that's a movie moment.

These days everyone is buzzing about Hollywood and its celebrities. Learn from the above examples, take action to give your members genuine red-carpet customer service, and you'll be creating the kind of bona fide buzz that grows your association by giving your members the celebrity experience. **an**

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