

Why You Should Know More About BarCamps

How user-generated conferences are changing traditional marketing.

By: *Nancy A. Shenker*

January 27, 2010

Last week, I set the stage by blogging about the anxiety and adjustment that comes with radical shifts in our business perspective. After the last post, I attended REBar Camp NYC, a gathering of real estate professionals who are active in social media. This week, I am attending CampMinder Camp 2010, an event for summer camp directors, held at an actual summer camp. And, when I return, I'll be spending a little time at Event Camp NYC during Social Media Week. For someone who never actually went to camp as a child, I'm certainly making up for it now!

These camps are a natural offshoot of the [BarCamp](#) model, which basically takes the principle of user-generated content (readily apparent in the social media world today) and extends it to face-to-face events...for better or worse.

Ironically, my last corporate position was at Reed Exhibitions, the most established of all "traditional" trade show organizers. Trade shows are to camps as a website is to Facebook. The "people" are running the show. Sometimes it works...sometimes it's unsettling. Camp organizers pride themselves on the fact that everyone can participate and that the environment is one of controlled chaos. And, as progressive as I can be in my thinking and my business, I still think that chaos of any kind is not a good mix with hospitality.

What I like about the camp model is:

- Marketing is almost 100% viral. For organizers, that cuts down dramatically on cost.
- One doesn't need to be "accepted" as a speaker. Anyone who has something to say can sign up to run a session.
- Sponsorships are usually very affordable.
- Attendance is often free.
- The entire environment is full of surprises, new connections, and progressive learning. It is very collaborative and "Woodstockian."
- The attendees are usually very adept at social media (since that is usually the only marketing technique used to attract them). I learn new skills every time I go.
- The after-parties are fun.

What I believe camp organizers can learn from professional show organizers (or even from summer camps themselves) is:

- Everyone likes to be greeted warmly when he/she comes into a new place. Some camps start with a welcome keynote, but others seem to subscribe to the "aimless wandering" philosophy.
- The flip side of the "free" philosophy is that camps tend to attract people who do not want to pay for quality content. That can make for a very random audience (which is both good and bad).
- Although everyone can speak, not everyone is a pro at public speaking. And, even though attendees are encouraged to "vote with their feet" if they don't like a session, I still feel rude walking out on a presentation. (Plus, people Tweeting between the rooms about speaker quality, but the speakers usually don't get any formal feedback). It reminds me of passing notes in high school - except we now use our cell phones.

I plan to continue to retain "dual citizenship" in the trade show/conference and camp worlds. I believe that both types of events have much to offer.

So, if you haven't checked out a camp yet in your industry, I urge you to do so. Please share your perspectives here too. These camps may not entail lanyards, color war, or Kumbaya, but they are clearly here to stay as an alternative to the traditional conference. See you around the bunk!

This article was originally published in the New York Enterprise Report.