

Seven Secrets to Making a Science Museum Event Unforgettable - and Profitable

By Daryl Sprout

1. The topic all by itself must create excitement and public curiosity.

Since Science Museums represent the vanguard of the interactive flow of information about Life Science, one of the most proven methods of generating large visitor turnout is the live animal show. Certain types of animal shows not only create public interest, they ensnare it. Maximum impact – and nothing less – is what it takes for a museum to hit a home run with their visitors.

2. Production value equals impact.

Let's face it: most animal shows take the "Here's what it is, here's where it's from, here's what it eats" approach. Yes, it's informative, but very dry, especially with so many animal-related TV programs on the airwaves that incorporate slick studio imagery and an endless supply of picture-perfect animal moments. A live show must offer something more. For an audience to really *absorb* whatever message you want to impart to them (including your museum membership, gift shop, and 'other attractions' messages) they must be genuinely *entertained*.

3. Your talent must not only be good at entertainment and education, but good at *sales*.

A large-format event should leave you with an impressive bottom line. Anything less is spinning your wheels in today's competitive environment. The talent you hire must be able to effectively cross-sell before, during and after the show. In essence, you need a team player.

4. Sales of new memberships should be a primary goal of your event

The better you promote the event, the longer your lines will be. This is a good thing. Try to arrange your stanchions to control these lines to be visible to passersby. The energy is always contagious. Simply creating a separate ticket line for new memberships that allows them to circumvent the longer line and enjoy special event-related benefits (in addition to the usual benefits of museum membership) will create new traffic all by itself.

Even existing members will see the value of this, as they understand how much more that new membership queue is paying to get in. Special "event-only" signup incentives are also a good idea. Do what you can to make these new members feel like VIP's at your event.

5. Highlight your gift shop

No matter what kind of show you book, it is usually possible to purchase theme-related items that can drive extra traffic to your gift shop. A well-delivered presentation should include a gentle pitch delivered by your talent, suggesting that these are the very items that will let your guests' children go home with a memento of the experience.

Some types of product may move well even without being topically specific, if promoted correctly. I once told a Science Center to provide me with three of their "squishy balls" (transparent with sparkly or cloudy middles) which I told the audience were, "among my favorite items in the museum's very cool gift shop." I then proceeded to juggle them for a few moments, and when I dropped one I let the kid who picked it up keep it. By the end of that day, they were sold out of squishy balls.

Your talent should be able to relay to your crowd that supporting your gift shop means supporting programs like the one they are enjoying, and that they're helping science itself prosper right there in their own community.

6. Extreme impact publicity doesn't have to cost a fortune

Promotional value has always been higher for news coverage than for advertising—and it's a whole lot less expensive. Your talent must be media savvy and hopefully have a long list of media appearances to increase the confidence of your local networks and independents. Contact all of them with a well-written press release and, if possible, sample on-air clips of your hired talent. Consider sending a second release closer to the time of your first show to any affiliates who don't respond.

This second release should highlight another aspect of your talent's arrival so that at least the first couple of paragraphs read very differently from the first release. Your talent should be able to provide an example of a successful release that has been used to introduce the show before. Adapt it to suit your situation, and make sure to mention all of the other attractions your event will include.

Your talent should be informed of these attractions and given the correct wording to promote them. It sounds better coming from your talent (if they can convey the proper excitement about the other attractions) than it will from one of your staff. TV, Radio and newspaper interviews need to include mention of these other attractions.

Animals make great teasers for TV news spots. Play up this aspect, and your talent should be able to parlay that into significant airtime. Of course, ads are important too. Special attention should be paid to any local "Calendar of Events" listings. Often your press release alone will be enough to secure prominent mention there. If necessary, remind your local affiliates about how important their coverage of your event is to the promotion of science education in their coverage area.

One last thought. For on-site impact during your event, consider placing on top of your building an inflatable animal of the type you'll be showcasing. The bigger the better.

7. Pick your topic well

My specialty happens to be snakes, and I've learned that nothing captures the interest and imagination of the masses like snakes – with the possible exception of big cats. While large felines are great (I've worked with them before and have a scar to show for it) the logistics and expenses involved can be very daunting and cost prohibitive.

Snakes invoke fascination, in part because of ophidiophobia (the fear of snakes), which is still somewhat prevalent in certain parts of the population, but also because of the intense focus on snakes by numerous nature programs on TV. People like Steve Erwin have become international personalities and household names. Programs of this kind help keep science on the minds and in the hearts of the general public, and it's a wave the savvy Science Museum would do well to ride.

Another advantage of snakes is the possibility of direct audience interaction. While other animal shows are constantly trying to counteract the stress on their animals brought on by loud, enthusiastic crowd response, *snakes have no ears*.

Several times during the show, I bring volunteers onstage to hold snakes. All of the animals that come in contact with humans are harmless and have proven docile over years of shows for crowds of all ages. At the end of my show, I take a large, gentle python with me to the exit door, and allow all who wish to experience the thrill of overcoming their fear to actually touch the snake. The result is one I've seen a thousand times: "Wow! It's not really slimy, it's not really creepy - and it's not really after me!" The end result is, well, unforgettable!

www.snakeencounters.com