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Gamification:

Winning the Engagement Challenge at Tradeshows and Events

OCTOBER 2015

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Introduction

Games and contests have been used to attract customers ever since the first corner store offered a bottle of hair tonic for guessing the number of pennies in a jar. Companies throughout the 20th century rewarded consumers for their winning essays about the wonders of their products ("Homemakers, tell us what Lux soap means to *your* family!"). And not so long ago exhibitors tossed T-shirts to those tradeshow attendees who most loudly shouted the answers to brand-boosting quiz questions.

Business-sponsored games and challenges are no less popular today. In this paper we'll look at how strategic and valuable they've become for exhibitors and meeting producers, as well as how helpful they've become for customers.

Yesterday's booth bingo has given way to *gamification*, a term applied to any activity that strategically uses a game, or elements of a game, to engage others toward goals that go beyond mere winning. Those goals could include educating people, encouraging teamwork, solving problems, or changing behavior. Whether the methodology is low- or high-tech, solo- or group-oriented, the common denominator is engagement — motivating people to take part and rewarding them for doing so.

Motive Appeals: Why Play?

The question driving the core psychology of gamification is: What motivates people to play? There is no single answer, of course, nor is there a simple one. Each customer demographic will possess its characteristic motivation drivers even as a percentage of the group departs from the profile. The greater the understanding of the demographic, however, the greater the ability to know what is important to them and what motivates them. Such information is fundamental to a truly engaging game design.

The primary motivation mechanisms driving engagement in games include:

- **Competition:** How can I do better than my peers?
- **Mastery:** How good can I get at this?
- **Learning:** How can I increase my knowledge?
- **Achievement:** How will it feel to add this to my wins?
- **Status:** How good will winning make me look?
- **Sociability:** How can I connect more closely with my team?
- **Altruism:** How can I contribute to the social good?

The best-designed games trigger more than one of these motive appeals. A game that was designed for Ferring Pharmaceutical, for example, touched multiple motivations of its audience of medical professionals. At a tradeshow in Las Vegas, the company used a poker-inspired game to educate participants about its products and procedures.

Using touchscreen technology, the game started each player with a stack of poker chips and then dealt three playing cards for every new question in the quiz. Participants chose a response by dragging and dropping chips from their stack onto the card they felt was the correct answer. Correct answers increased a player's stack of chips; incorrect answers resulted in a loss of chips.

Each player was asked five questions and had the option to play multiple times to improve his or her score (questions changed from game to game). Throughout the activity, the participants learned new information on how to perform colonoscopies more effectively. The highest-scoring players received recognition from leader boards that towered over the booth. And, in the spirit of cause marketing, money matching the amount of the winning chips was donated to the Colonoscopy Association, a nonprofit close to the hearts of the attendees.

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10 Benefits of Gamification

Game formats at tradeshows or meetings offer businesses 10 important wins:

1. Flexibility. Games can be designed from scratch or repurposed from existing formats to deliver customized messages.

2. Visibility. Game environments attract attention, increasing participation. Signage that advertises incentives and leader boards that track player progress can act as beacons to passersby and heighten the excitement.

3. Sociability. Games have a friendly vibe (a perception that can extend to the company sponsoring them). They provide instant icebreakers between staff and prospects, or between attendees at conferences, making approaching and being approached easier and more enjoyable.

4. Enjoyment. From TV game shows and smartphone Solitaire to World of Warcraft and Candy Crush, people *know and love* games. Games elicit positive emotional states. And a booth with attendees in high spirits can be contagious.

5. Reward. Whether the prize is a bar of chocolate, a trip to The Bahamas, a virtual trophy, a nonprofit donation, or recognition of a job well done, games evoke the yearning to win. If the right motivational mechanism is struck, people will play.

6. Immersion. Games provide a single point of focus that demands complete attention if the player is to succeed. Arguably no other messaging tool requires—and *gets*—as high a degree of concentration from the target audience.

7. Retention. Games can accelerate learning by simultaneously stimulating the visual, aural, and tactile senses. With more neurons firing, the brain retains more of the experience and the information embedded within it. When the prospect wins the game, the "win" comes with an understanding of the business message that, in the best cases, will have value for them.

8. Transition. Qualified prospects who learn about the brand or products through the game are primed for more-targeted discussions with booth reps. From the game environment it may be just a few steps to demo stations or private meeting areas, where the discovery process can further develop.

9. Buzz. At tradeshows and meetings alike, a great game gets word of mouth. The more people that talk, tweet, photograph, and post social media about it, the greater the exposure for the company. Games can also increase the amount of time people spend in the booth, which provides more opportunities for staff to interact with them and build relationships.

10. Continuity. Some games, especially those with educational objectives, can be designed for use beyond the meeting or tradeshow. They can become effective sales tools in the field or online.

Gamification and Efficiencies

Gartner, Inc., estimates that 40 percent of Global 1000 companies use gamification as their primary mechanism to transform business operations. That comes as no surprise to global professional services firm Deloitte, which found that gamification can "reduce learning time by 50 percent."

Reduced learning time was the primary goal of Exelis (now part of Harris Corp.), a defense and information solutions provider that wanted to find a faster, more-compelling way for its tradeshow staff to educate prospects, mostly government employees, about the company and its products. The company profile was so complex that the opening prospect question — "What does Exelis do?" — took staffers 15–20 minutes to answer, during which time dozens of potential prospects passed by and prospects checked their watches.

> What had previously taken staffers more than a quarter of an hour to communicate now took 45 seconds, from game start to finish.

The solution took the form of three mission-critical games activated by touch screens. Prospects assumed the aerial perspectives of first responders on missions to fly medical supplies to survivors of an earthquake in Haiti, locate land mines in Afghanistan, and battle forest fires in California.

In the Haiti scenario, players had to be able to identify collapsed bridges and destroyed roads in order to find an open route across the island. Ground troops in the Afghanistan challenge tried to navigate a battlefield, and the California pilots had to maneuver amid intense smoke from several raging fires below.

The players were given 20 seconds to complete their missions. Not one of them succeeded.

Their failure, of course, was by design.

After the players experienced the frustration of these ripped-from-the-headlines situations, the Exelis solution kicked in. The software mapped out aerial points of view with such clarity and detail that the players were able to chart their routes in just 20 seconds. What had previously taken staffers more than a quarter of an hour to communicate now took 45 seconds, from game start to finish.

The game enhanced staffer productivity while fully engaging and educating prospects. The company commissioned three more games that were used at many subsequent tradeshows and events as well as on sales calls.

7 Features of Effective Games

Although there is no formula that guarantees a game's success, every effective game has in common the following criteria:

Appropriate. The game must be a logical fit with the company and its products or, at the very least, the theme of the event. A customer dance contest might not make much sense for a global transport company, for example, unless its campaign theme was "Ensuring Smooth Moves." The game medium must match the message.

Accessible. When a game looks inviting, people want to dive right into it. Sponsors can inadvertently kill spontaneity if they make players jump through too many administrative hoops before they play. The pregame qualifying process should be minimized in order to avoid the perception of a joyless "pay to play" setup. Data on visitors can be obtained through lead capture, a postgame survey, and metrics.

Simple. The goals and rules of a game should be intuitively (and therefore immediately) grasped, if not teachable in a matter of seconds—explanations lasting any longer than that risk intimidating would-be participants. An effective game is simple even if the task is challenging.

> By the end of the game, prospects, whether alone or in groups, had been introduced to nine different products or services.

Brief. A game that takes too long to play can cause participants and onlookers to lose interest. Crowds can be nice to have in a booth, but one that stays too long can impede traffic flow. The activity must be brief in keeping with the environment, participant numbers, and schedule. For these reasons games at meetings and tradeshows tend to lack some of the ingredients found in popular consumer games, such as progressive difficulty, complex options, and multiple tools.

Winable. A game should be challenging without frustrating the players to the point that they feel negatively toward the game. Although it can be useful, from a learning standpoint, to design a game that makes winning difficult, the most-successful games for customers make winning the more-likely outcome.

Transparent. Players want to know whether their moment-to-moment actions are working. The game needs to give instant feedback. A lack of transparency in the game is like an employee performance review where the boss says, "You've been doing a lot of things wrong—and I've waited until now to tell you."

Guided. A game that enables visitors to walk up and play without any interaction from staff is a wasted opportunity. Even the simplest and most-self-guided games need facilitators to create a context for the players, creating a sense of *meaning* for what they're about to experience. The facilitator (typically a staff member or brand ambassador) can invite and qualify the players, reinforce the message of the game, ensure that the rules are followed, provide light play-by-play commentary (if appropriate) and encouragement, and hand off the player to reps following the game.

Face-to-Face Games

LMT Onsrud, a cutting-and-drilling-tools company, wanted to avoid the hand-off process at trade shows by hosting a game that directly put prospects face-to-face with company reps. Following a brief qualifying process, prospects were invited to play a matching game and were handed a tablet device. Upon tapping the screen, players saw several of the company's products on a nine-square grid. The rep gave a speed-briefing of the products while encouraging the players to do their best to remember these products.

When players tapped the next screen, most of the previous products were still on the grid — along with one that had *not* been there before. Players who were able to point out the new product were then told about benefits. By the end of the game, prospects, whether alone or in groups, had been introduced to nine different products or services.

The sales reps enjoyed the freedom to put their own spin on the company's products and messages and personalize, on the spot, their interactions with prospects. The visitors enjoyed the challenge of discerning what was different from grid to grid, and they learned a lot in a few short minutes. Though low-tech by most gamification standards, the activity met the company's goals of high levels of engagement and interactivity.

Ramping Up the Competition

There's no limit to the levels of competition that can be designed into a game. Players can compete alone, with or against others, or against a technology. RoboVent utilized several of these competitive elements to demonstrate its system for delivering clean air and healthy environments in manufacturing facilities.

The game: players raced Anki cars around a track, using smart phones to control speed and direction. They competed not only against each other but against a smart car that "learns" from the moves of its competitors and anticipates them. Although the smart car outmaneuvered the other vehicles in the majority of games, it *didn't always* take the lead. Knowing about the smart car's vulnerability heightened the competitive zeal of the players, who not only pushed to win as individuals but found themselves rooting for each other against their common "foe."

Not only was the game an attendee favorite at the show, but it scored a major messaging win for RoboVent. The smart car was the perfect analogy for its featured product's ability to continuously analyze air quality in a facility and self-adjust to keep the air at its highest level.

Games Repurposed

When budgets prevent the development of a unique game, game rentals can provide affordable options. A pharmaceutical company found a new use for a game that had proved successful for other companies. Brand Ambassadors invited visitors, most of whom were physicians, to step into a virtual mockup of a submarine cockpit.

The players used joysticks to move the virtual submarine left or right as it propelled through a perilous landscape of icebergs. A button on the joystick enabled them to destroy an iceberg and continue on their trajectory until, seconds later, more icebergs appeared.

Every time a participant smashed an iceberg, another challenge was introduced onscreen in the form of a multiple-choice quiz question.

The response to participants' answers was either "That's correct and here's why …" or "Oops– try again!" The more quickly players got the right answers, the higher the points awarded them. At the end of the game, a leader board displayed the names of the highest scorers, for bragging rights.

Pharmacology and submarines have no obvious connection. But by customizing the game to meet their particular needs, the company was able to attract visitors to a fun activity, reward their prospects' knowledge *and* desire to compete, educate them further, and publicly recognize their status. Building on the engagement with their brand, the company surveyed participants following the game.

> Many objectives were met in this exercise: the interdependence and sense of community built organically by the teams, and their exposure to multiple brands during the hunt.

Team-Building Games for Meetings

The great variety and popularity of games at meetings are well documented. Most are centered on team building or fostering a sense of community. One of the most enduring of these is the scavenger hunt. A truly standout benefit of this activity is that it can involve any number of players.

At a conference at Montreal's picturesque Mont Tremblant ski resort, an association sent 1,000 attendees, bundled into teams, on a scavenger hunt. While following the clues, the teams were led to — and then learned about — many different corporate sponsors, each of which had provided one of the sought-after "objects" of the hunt. Many objectives were met in this exercise: the interdependence and sense of community built organically by the teams, and their exposure to multiple brands during the hunt.

The continuing appeal of scavenger hunts is enhanced today by the inclusion of technology as a tool. Players log in for the hunt on their smart phones or tablets. They "capture" the hunted objects via RFID scans or by taking photos and upload the results for instant tallies and a chance at a grand prize.

> The room came alive with conversation and laughter as attendees engaged one another in their efforts to solve the visual puzzles onscreen.

For its annual franchisee meeting, Millicare, a national textile and carpet company, wanted to encourage in attendees a deeper sense of brand loyalty and community. A variety of creative team-building activities were scheduled for an after-hours event. Franchisees quickly got to know each other as they formed teams and competed to see which team could build a bicycle from a kit the fastest (the bicycles were then donated to a charity).

The teams then responded to a series of beat-the-clock challenges that determined which one could:

- build the tallest or most elaborate house of cards
- create the most useful object from a cardboard box
- design a marketing campaign for the object

To help them accomplish these goals, the teams were given tokens with which they could "purchase" materials from other teams. By the end of the evening, fast friendships had been made. Franchisees who had previously felt isolated from the enterprise now reported a greater sense of connection to it. The people were engaged as members of the "Millicare family."

Sports & Fitness Activities for Meetings
Games operated by motion sensors, such as Wii or Kinect, enable companies to incorporate sports or fitness into their meeting activities. These offer simple and immediate ways for attendees to blow off steam and have a little fun — with or without a message attached. Because many people play these games at home with their children, the games' presence at corporate events can help to quickly break the ice and elicit a positive association with family.

Sedentary Games for Meetings

Games at meetings don't always have to involve high energy or high stakes to engage people. In fact, some can be downright passive. NextGen Healthcare sought to provide a game that could *nonintrusively* engage their conference attendees, seated at large round tables, during a breakfast. The company wanted an activity that people could opt to ignore if they were already enjoying interacting with their tablemates yet that could provide a pleasant distraction — and possible icebreaker—for those *not* engaged in conversation.

Inspired by the preshow Movie Facts trivia that silently engages moviegoers, the solution was a series of brand-related slides that posed various quiz challenges. One involved showing images heavily obscured by pixilation. Slowly, in stages, the images became less pixilated until they were revealed in full. The object of the game was to try to identify the images long before they were revealed. The images reflected the meeting's theme of partnership, depicting famous pairings such as Ben & Jerry, Lewis & Clark, and Salt & Pepper.

The activity had the intended effect: The room came alive with conversation and laughter as attendees engaged one another in their efforts to solve the visual puzzles onscreen. Equally important, NextGen's partnership theme was now well established in preparation for the opening session.

Conclusion

Gamification offers a powerful engagement tool wherever people are motivated by the spirit of play, the lure of competition, or the desire to learn, excel, explore, give back, or come together as a team or community. Given the sea changes brought on, almost regularly now, by the Digital Age, we seem to be rapidly approaching a time when gamification will have integrated so completely into the culture that it has become the assumption rather than the exception.

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