



Event pitching: The role of design and creativity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research is to contribute towards a better understanding of the role of design and creativity in the pitch phase of an event bid. The paper does not seek to re-document the formal proposal process of preparing and bidding for an event but instead will look at an element within event bidding, the pitch to the client. Winning an event pitch is a crucial part of the events industry and is undertaken by most event management companies (EMC) or agencies. It is highly competitive. The material is based on qualitative research with key individuals working in the events industry and presents selective reflections upon the pitch process, the rationale and criteria for pitching and the extent to which they use creative thinking to win. Design and creativity are essential components that help make events memorable experiences, but as the paper demonstrates they also have a significant role in securing the event contract in the first place. In some cases elaborate and extreme design tactics are used to make a successful pitch.

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1. Introduction

Bidding for events is an everyday part of the events landscape for agencies working with corporate and public clients (Berridge, 2007) and has become an increasing part of strategic and policy initiatives by destinations to attract new business (Getz, 2004). A key element in the bidding process is the presentational 'pitch' to the client. The purpose of the research is to offer a better understanding of some of the key issues in event pitching and, in particular, some of the more creative approaches used in pitching. The majority of organisations operating in the events industry (in the UK) are typically small companies or agencies employing less than 20 permanent staff and pitching for new contracts is an essential part of their day to day operations. For those working in this commercial sector, pitching accounts from anywhere between 20 and 40% of their revenue whereas those working within the public sector it can account for 100%. An 'invitation to pitch' for a private, entertainment or celebration based event, is normally done by direct invitation from the client and often involves no more than 3 competitors making a 30–45 min presentational 'pitch' on ideas for the event. In the public sector and for many larger events the pitch is preceded by a pre-qualifying questionnaire or bidding stage, which mostly includes the formal documentation of a bid. From these bidders a short list is drawn and those on it are then invited to formally pitch for the event. A literature overview of event management texts ensues, followed by an explanation of methodology. Results from interviews with 9

people are then selectively discussed to highlight how agencies view pitching and the creative ideas they employ to be successful.

2. Literature review

The growing body of literature on event management has established that study by and large focuses upon planned events (Getz, 2008). Characteristically this study covers the key knowledge areas identified in the Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK) domains, namely administration, design, marketing, operations and risk (Silvers et al., 2006). In practical terms the literature discusses the planning, organisation and management of planned events and this is then further explored and discussed to give the reader a clear level of knowledge about what an event is, how to run one and the role events played in society (Allen et al., 2005; Shone and Parry, 2004; Raj et al., 2009; Van der Wagen and Carlos, 2005). There are a number of terms used within academia and industry in relation to securing contracts to run such events, and the boundaries or use of each is sometimes blurred or used as a catch-all to include all the processes involved in winning such a contract. For example, event contracts occur between individual agencies running events for corporate clients over a single day/evening event where there may be a highly creative or bespoke approach taken to the event concept. By comparison there are those events related to destination development where the event may be spread for several days and requires travel, accommodation, and leisure planning in addition to the event planning. Various the terms that reappear time and again (Walters, 2008) to explain the process of securing an event contract are procurement, bidding, and pitching. In terms of research it is

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the latter that is the least developed of these and is the focus of this research but it might assist understanding to summarise the others first.

2.1. Procurement

Due to the significant role played by Visitor and Convention Bureaus, event 'procurement' is the most difficult to define because of the range of activities associated with procurement. It is most readily used within the conferences, conventions and meetings industry due to proliferation of corporate, association and public sector involvement and where there is a clear distinction between 'buyers' and 'suppliers' (Rogers, 2003). Procurement management is viewed as the 'sourcing, selection and contracting of the suppliers and vendors from whom goods and services will be procured using accurate solicitation materials and quality criterion' (Silvers, 2008). Procurement is widely interpreted and so difficult to clearly define, but nevertheless it can be seen as a business management function that ensures identification, sourcing, access and management of the external resources that an organisation needs or may need to fulfil its strategic objectives (Kidd, 2005). Procuring events falls within these two ideas through the activity of procurement planning and solicitation when event management companies are invited to bid for an event or an association or organisation issues a request for proposals. Visitor Convention Bureaus, for example, act in a procurement capacity by actively seeking and attracting events as part of the wider strategic policy of a region to attract more visitors (Rogers, 2003; Davidson and Cope, 2003) and public and other bodies use the appeal of events to enhance the image of a destination (Gold and Ward, 1994; Smith, 2001; Pugh, 2004; Boo and Busser, 2006).

2.2. Bidding

Event bidding tends to describe a series of activities that make up a 'bid' and, like procurement, can include 'request for proposals', and is often associated with major or mega events (sport, conferences or cultural events), ones that are a one-off or run infrequently, change location each time (Allen et al., 2005) and can also be classed as hallmark or mega events (Gratton et al., 2001). Although by no means exclusively the preserve of sports events, it is in this area that bidding has received the most attention and in which most academic work has been undertaken. This is not surprising since three of the world's largest events – the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup and the Commonwealth Games are sports events and the economic and social impact of hosting such an event is regarded as beneficial to the host. The bid process itself begins with the event owners inviting cities or countries to submit a proposal (Catherwood and Van Kirk, 1997; Emery, 2002; Masterman and Wood, 2004; Allen, 2002). An announcement is made either in public or by nomination to a number of associations. The event owner then establishes a set process for bidding and the timetable by which time-critical information or documentation must be lodged (Maralack and Lloyd, 2006; Getz, 1997). Guidelines and criteria for successful bidding are documented (Westerbeek et al., 2002; Swart and Urmilla, 2004) as are a number of commonly cited reasons why destinations and national governing bodies of sport bid to host sport events (Emery, 2001, 2002; Essex and Chalkley, 1998; Gold and Gold, 2008; Horte and Persson, 2003; Jago et al., 2003). Such events can be used to improve the brand identity of a city on a global scale (Walters, 2008). Because of this, competition to host such events is intense but does vary with the type of event, for example major junior events are mostly not the result of competitive bidding (Blake, 2005, 2008). The value of the events market is growing and further

highlights why there is such interest in securing the rights to run the:

The right to host an international event is now one of the most valuable prizes in sport. The 2007 Dubai International Sports Conference valued the market at US\$50 billion worldwide, while UK Sport estimates such events contribute £1.5 billion to the British economy each year (Walmsley, 2008).

It is predicted for the London 2012 Olympics that the event will generate an additional 8164 full-time equivalent jobs and add £1.936 billion to GDP between 2005 and 2016 (Blake, 2005). Major and mega events like this often involve public funding and the rights to host them are held by governing bodies that have a degree of accountability to the sport and their constituency. They are also likely to require considerable resources to organise and hence, carry a high degree of risk with them (Emery, 2002). For major events discussion and analysis of such bids tends to consider the rationale for bidding in the first place, the requirements of the bid, the strategy and policy of the bidding city and the impact a successful bid would have on the economic, social, political and cultural environment (Gratton and Henry, 2001). The bidding process itself is said to consist of five stages: the event objectives; the venue selection; strategic planning; feasibility study; bid procedure (Emery, 2002).

2.3. Pitching

Pitching can be referred to as the physical act of presenting the conceptual ideas of the bid to the client, in person, and the stage at which the competitive contract to run the events is won or lost (Berridge, 2007). It is a competitive process that is the chance for the EMC to verbally and visually 'pitch' their ideas to the client. The term 'pitch' is commonly used by industry professionals (especially those working with corporate clients) and is regarded as a key part in persuading the client to offer the contract for the event. However literature on events makes little or no reference to the term, tending instead to refer to the process as the presentation (Allen, 2002; Masterman and Wood, 2004), as an oral bid (Catherwood and Van Kirk, 1997) or simply regards the competitive process as culminating only in a written proposal (Monroe, 2006; Matthews, 2007). Therefore what tends to be studied is the framework or blueprint that establishes why an event is being considered, what the event idea is, how that can be conceptualised, and subsequently how it can be planned and organised. However what is often missing from these studies is the key stage of the process, the acquisition of the right to manage the event and, perhaps more importantly, how this is achieved. This knowledge on the 'pitch', both in terms of strategies used in pitching and the creative elements of the actual pitch, are relatively speaking under explored areas. This is despite the suggestion that in terms of winning a bid, creativity is regarded as one of the most important aspects (Matthews, 2007).

2.4. Event design and creativity

The role of design and creativity in event management is widely, albeit sometimes inconsistently, acknowledged in playing a central part in the planned event experience and this is especially the case for those events with a strong thematic, celebratory and entertainment element (Malouf, 1999; Sonder, 2004; Monroe, 2006; Matthews, 2007; Silvers, 2004; Allen et al., 2005). As the sources above suggest creating, conceptualising and designing an event requires a series of activities that must meet the client's perceptions of their event. Design can be used strategically to create an event proposal (Allen, 2002) and it can also be the

underlying principle, or blueprint that establishes the event idea and experience (Goldblatt, 2004). Understanding and applying design skills to event management are explored with guidance offered on the basic principles of design, the aesthetic principles to use in practice and further technical advice for using design ideas in creating event environments (Malouf, 1999; Monroe, 2006; Van der Wagen and Carlos, 2005; Matthews, 2007; Goldblatt, 2004).

It is also suggested that design should be considered as an essential element upon which any event is planned and should be regarded as a skilled action or an act of creativity that gives something a visual identity or recognition and that the conceptual development and design of an event should be focussed upon maximising the positive and meaningful impact for the event's audience and/or participants (Brown, 2005). Most studies explore the idea of the event concept as a starting point for developing the event idea, whereupon the event elements can be then designed to express the concept. Often a unifying theme is put forward as a way of connecting the design elements with the event experience (Allen et al., 2005; Malouf, 1999). These principles should apply irrespective of the type of event (Berridge, 2007) but their level of application will vary depending upon the extent to which design and creativity is required in the event. An event with a strong entertainment or celebratory theme would require more design input than say an educational or business meeting.

The process of research, development and feasibility for any design idea has to be undertaken by the EMC to ensure that the event can go ahead as envisaged. Very limited information exists on the approach EMC's, agencies or individual freelance events managers take to preparing a pitch to the client. It is also an area where there is a great deal of interest and debate, not least because it raises issues of costs (to the pitching company) and confidentiality and copyright of ideas (Somerset, 2005). This was evidenced at successive International Special Events Society (ISES) Education Conferences (2005–2006) where presentations on 'pitching' were overbooked.

3. Methodology

The sample was selected using an approach that was a mixture of convenience and expert referral as it was important to identify appropriate personnel and EMC's who were regularly involved in pitching. Initially personal industry contacts were approached for advice on possible interviewees and this yielded several prospects. In addition the membership base of the International Special Events Society (UK) was also used. ISES is generally held to be the association that attracts most of creative and design agencies in the UK. Using information freely available on the ISES website, and targeting members listed under design and creativity, a list was drawn up. All prospective participants had websites and email contact so each of these was contacted with a request for interview. This resulted in nine interviewees taking place. Since most of the companies employed less than 10 staff, finding the right person to speak to was not a problem. The positions they held in the organisations varied and included account directors, creative directors, sales directors, managing directors/owners, and marketing managers. Initial enquiries centred on the extent and frequency they presented creative pitches. Each participant was formally requested to be interviewed and a date was set. All interviews, bar one, took place between October 2007 and February 2008.

Interviews were conducted using a qualitative semi-structured approach with the emphasis placed upon active interviewing. Two–three weeks before the meeting each participant was sent a 'question guide' which outlined the general areas for discussion. Whilst these acted as guidelines the idea was to actively encourage narrative accounts by inviting them to develop stories that elaborated on content and would, hopefully, enable connections to be made with other narratives. This also included the expected

length of time of the interview (between around 60 min), confirmation of anonymity and confidentiality, and asked for their permission to record the interview. Data collection was hampered by work commitments on the part of those selected, with five separate participants having to re-arrange their interviews at least 3 times, one in fact rescheduled 6 times. Two interviews had to have follow-up sessions due to interruptions. Interviews were recorded by audio digital recorder or by concurrent typed entry into a laptop. The following day after each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed whilst laptop entries were cleaned up and corrected for typing errors.

Responses were subsequently grouped through content analysis software (Site Content Analyzer) and adopting a conceptual analysis approach to establish the consistency and frequency of concepts in terms of weight and count (Krippendorff, 1980). The results of this analysis (see Chart 1) influenced the sub-headings used to group the key findings. The aim was to see if coherent and meaningful configurations emerged through the narrative accounts. Since this exercise in data collection is not about developing statistical incidence, the data is presented in a narrative format with verbatim comments in italics on key issues interspersed throughout the text.

3.1. Limitations

The population, sampling frame and subsequent sample and selection of interviewees is not meant to be representative of the events industry but is specifically looking at small EMC's who, in general, are obtaining a significant proportion of their work from pitching to corporate clients. In all cases this is more than 30%. In the main these are stand-alone events based around an entertainment and celebratory experience that, mostly, runs across either a single day or a portion of that day. As such it is meant to give an insight into their practices and not those of all agencies involved in pitching, especially those dealing with destination bidding where the event runs for a whole day or across several days and where design and creativity is, perhaps, more to do with programming and packaging of the event elements offered at the destination. The sample size is ultimately narrow and selective, based on personal

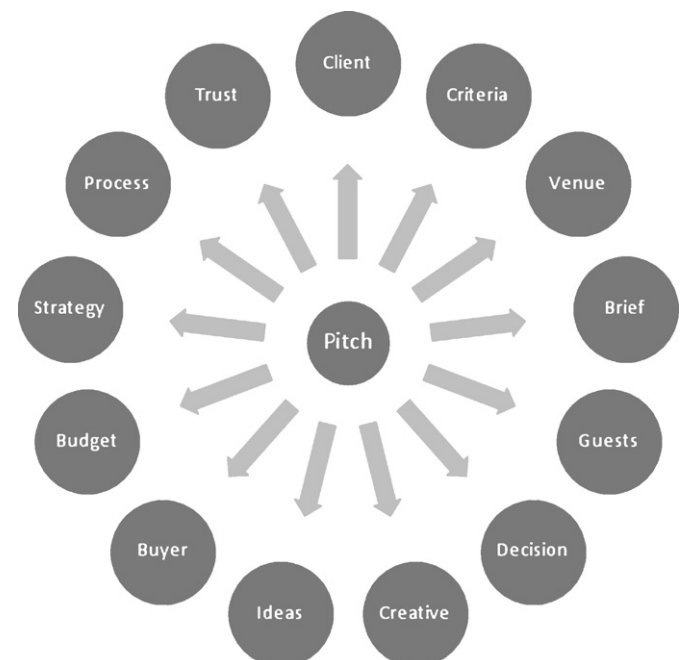


Chart 1. Keyword/phrase count and weight from content analysis of interviews. In order of frequency the chart should be read clockwise starting with 'client'.

contacts and membership of ISES and is UK based only, although this does not mean that international pitches are excluded since several of the agencies involved work both in the UK and overseas. As interviews were semi-structured, this is not an attempt to collect quantifiable data for detailed comparison but more about discovering areas of similarity based on narrative accounts of practitioners.

4. Key findings and analysis

4.1. The brief

A general view amongst all participants was that the process of bidding and pitching can be very badly managed by the client. This occurred time and time again and in some cases demonstrated appalling bid management by clients in the first place. All participants were critical of some of the briefs they received and it was felt that this dictated a lot of the pitch content. A good clear brief was likely to produce detailed, creative, concise and tight concepts whereas a vague one would most likely result in an indifferent pitch. It was repeatedly stressed that agencies needed to carefully read the brief and check the wording. One person observed that it was essential to do this to see if the result was a foregone conclusion, i.e. an incumbent was being re-employed or some other agency was already lined up. One of the key decisions to make when pitching was to match the cost of the pitch to the content brief to see if they complemented each other. So a £200k job should have a serious brief to go with it.

4.2. Criteria for pitching

All participants reflexively asked 'why pitch'? They stressed the importance of knowing that internally they had, or could get, the resources to pitch in the first place.

Where the client was looking for ideas was seen as encouraging as opposed to a client who simply wanted 'organisation'. Conducting a background check on the company and the event or events they had previously been associated with was normally undertaken. One commented '*Pitches revolve entirely around communication, with the best ones being based on a two-way dialogue with the client. Trust and credibility are important aspects of this process, one of the key criteria was to be able to talk to the client in their language, in other words to understand something about their ideas for selection.*'

One agency used a pro-forma checklist that they ran through each time which consisted of:

- Who organised their event?
- What worked?
- What would they do differently?
- Establish what relationship they have with the previous organiser?
- Who are you quoting against?
- Why have they asked you to pitch?
- Establish how many companies are pitching and how good they are?
- Why are they talking to you?
- What do they know about you?
- Establish where your company can have a positive design impact on their event?

4.3. Buying criteria

The ranges of issues to be considered at this stage were considerable. Nearly all participants stressed the following points: the need to establish a clear event budget and what it will cover; to establish how important the creative idea will be to win the

business; to consider the rapport that has been established with the client, and significantly, whether what we do complements their corporate culture; find out who is going to be the decision maker and if they will be at the pitch or will be delegating it to someone who will refer back. The latter was felt to be one of the most important issues of the pitch by several people, not least because it heavily influenced the creative element they would include. If the decision maker was not going to be present then the pitch was less likely to be designed heavy, simply because it then relied on someone else interpreting it and transmitting the message back to the decision maker.

Some clients are just a process driven, with little insight into you as a company. You don't know who they are going to send along to the pitch. Sometimes ideas can be tricky if you are presenting a creative idea to a non-creative company, a big multinational Petro-chemical firm.

4.4. Competitive pitching

A consensus of view emerged that, if possible, no-one really wanted to have to do a pitch because of the time and cost involved and the uncertainty of the outcome. All would prefer to be negotiating with clients in the knowledge they would plan the event rather than having to impress clients to win the contract. The issue of payment for pitching was raised several times, strongly in some cases, although it was accepted that clients would never do this. Although strongly worded, this is a typical view of how EMC's regard client knowledge:

Most of it is a complete waste of time. End problem, nobody can actually determine one product from another. Clients have no idea really – so procurement thing is a gut feel, trust, who is cheaper. How do you procure a caterer, I can do this for them – technical questions are never tested, so they have no clue on staff ratios, where staff come from. Searching questions are negligible, who are your chefs, banqueting managers, they never ask them due to ignorance.

4.5. The cost of pitching

A common thread emerged of the 'third quote syndrome', where there was an incumbent who had run the event before, another company who were likely bidders and then someone else was asked to make up the numbers. Most said they were less inclined to pitch if this fact was established and less inclined to invest time and effort in developing a really creative concept.

This has been an area of debate within the industry and is linked to other discussions elsewhere in the paper about whether or not clients should pay agencies to bid.

Costs were a factor in deciding to pitch, but there was limited consensus of the costs of a pitch. One commented that '*we put around 3–5% of expected return on the event in a pitch, so for a 200k job this can amount to £10,000*', whereas another suggested that their average was around the £1–2k mark. '*The most we have ever spent on a pitch is £17k, and that was for a job worth just under £1m*'. Most agencies were bidding for at least 1 event per week with success varying from 1 out of 10 to 2 out of 5.

We know exactly what our win ratio is 10:1. This suggests, at least to me, that it is not such a good investment, but I guess we couldn't afford to lose that so it is still something we have to do.

4.6. Trust in the client

The issue of trustworthiness was prominent and never went away in discussions with all participants, apart from the agency

that worked exclusively with the public sector. All those working with commercial clients had an experience of making a pitch to a large cooperation only to find that not only were they unsuccessful but several months later their ideas appeared in an event run directly by the prospective clients in-house events team. B**** Magazine asked for a pitch, then took all the ideas in-house and used them on their own events. It took us 5 days and 5K to put that pitch together. Another complaint on this was perhaps more serious:

The worst example though was from a multi-national sports company who did exactly the same but on a bigger scale. They secretly invited 15 agencies over to Germany to pitch ideas to them and gave no-one the contract. They then used a lot of the ideas and put them into their own in-house managed events.

One interesting point of view did emerge and that was what message the event should send to non-attendants. This was driven by commercial ideas of a repeat event or a similar type of event so that, if it was a public event, the message of a missed opportunity would be communicated to those not present. It was not made entirely clear how or if this would occur other than through PR activity.

4.7. Pitch conditions

A degree of unease was evident as several agencies had experienced changes in the process, such as this, *'the client called the pre-pitch meeting themselves and the other 4 agencies pitching were also present. On the client side there were about six people, all responsible for key decisions about the event. It was difficult at first as we were very uncertain about how much to give away, because of course our line of questioning would open up some of our ideas to competitors'*.

A further example illustrates the sometimes less than static conditions of pitching:

One time we turned up for a pitch and the whole thing had been changed. We had spent around 5–6k on it and we had met with the client once. Anyway we got their on the day and went into the board room to be faced by only one person. We had prepared a 45 minute pitch for four people, now we were being told we had 15 minutes to make a verbal one to one person. Was it mind games, a bit of psychology to see how we would react or think on our feet? I don't know.

4.8. Creative pitch tactics

Some factors that guided the extent of design creativity, in addition to those already noted, included perception of client, context of pitch, whether the agency were looking to make a statement or not, costs of the pitch, setting a marker down for the future and using psychology. The latter was sometimes a two-way process with the client also playing mind games whilst some agencies went to great lengths to establish a psychological hold.

Behavioural psychology is at the heart of what I do. That's what I am trained in. I have to think about how to get that across to a sometimes ignorant client. I also have to play around with their mind in the pitch. So I sit down and plan out the pitch. The problem is that clients can be evasive on that or they change their mind on the day. So I always have a fallback position that we can go to. I have quite a few subtle features that try to get the client on our side. I'm not going to tell you though what they are.

Another participant had this to say:

We were setting up in the board room and as I leant down to plug the laptop in, D**** lifted his head up and we banged heads.

We both laughed and rubbed each other's foreheads, then carried on. Afterwards the account director said she had noticed this and it showed that we bonded well and were together as a company compared to some others who were very cool and calculated. I don't advocate this is something we use all the time, but we have worked on a few other scenarios like this to use in certain pitches.

4.9. Pitch preparation

It was normal practice for there to be someone in the agency who, no matter what the event, pulled everything together and would be a part of the pitch team. All agencies prepared their staff, and some had very strict rules on who was going to attend the pitch. In all cases a senior agency staff member would develop the concept along with marketing staff, design staff and production staff. If specialist skills were needed then contract personnel would be brought in. One of the largest agencies in the research always sent their marketing director and 1 other person, and never sent a creative director. Others sent just a single person but no agency voluntarily sent more than 3 people unless the brief asked for it. A person did comment that in the early days of pitching they sent along groups of people so that all questions could be answered but they quickly realised what a mistake that was when in one pitch two colleagues got into an argument over the theme of the event. Elsewhere it was stated that the pitch team was based around the event type and design ideas and selected on that basis. One provided training: *'anyone who is going to be involved in a pitch has to attend a presentation skills course at a Theatre College. We look at all kinds of things – body posture, position, voice, pace, gesticulation, all the things that can help.*

And another left little to chance:

Our motto before a pitch is: Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse and do it again. Make sure the timing is to perfection. Make sure you know it inside out, so then you can be flexible in response to questions.

We always deliver ours to colleagues beforehand to see if the right message is being conveyed, if not we go back and re-design it.

4.10. Event design

Whilst the style of pitching varies, all expressed a need to get design ideas across as the level of competition in pitches was incredibly high. Documentation was usually in a luxury binding and contained text and visuals. Most included artist impressions of key design objects and spatial environments often on separate poster size boards. Some specifically used story-boards to narrate the event to the client. All had, at various times, included physical mock-ups or samples of design elements such as entertainment settings, props and invites. One also brought in 'actors' to play a role, representing a moment they envisaged in the event, *'we once had a guy dressed as Charlie Chaplin to demonstrate how we would re-create a silent movie theme for their evening'*.

PowerPoint was the most used format for presenting pitch ideas, but a multi-media format was not uncommon. *'We always use PowerPoint and we always use a multi-media format, so including say a DVD or similar, sometimes just a sound. They always get a brochure branded with our logo that contains information about us. If we are bidding for a wedding, we use a bound photo book that contains illustrations of a 'dream' £1m wedding. The idea is to show them we know how to design and create lavish experiences'*.

Another stated *'we try and keep up with production and technology, look at what is going on elsewhere, visit other event. We try to have weekly meetings to discuss this, whereby we update*

ourselves of what is happening creatively. We try to find out what might be changed in the market place, for example the increased use of CAD type software is factor these days, especially for highly visual events. So we always use design software, with a very clear idea of how the event will look. Best of all we can change things there like the layout, colour, theme and so on. We can even change the style of table, chair those kinds of things. I did one recently and we did it a bit like an artist's impression at a police station and set it up that way. So we asked the client to describe what they wanted or could see in their imagination and we built up the design of the event from there'.

The role of the venue in the pitch generated responses that were at the opposite ends of a scale. To some it was seen as essential, a chance to source and create a unique venue that would perfectly complement the thematic concept. To others it was irrelevant or a minor feature, based on the belief that anyone can find a venue. Everyone indicated they included a venue, with some offering a selection of suitable ones for the event. One person resolutely refused to suggest a specific venue.

We have a list of venues which we use so then we put it in, list the whole lot so client can choose. We can work in every venue in London so we can do it all. We bring costs and known problems of venues – venue add on-costs that client will not know about.

In contrast, and more frequent point, it was observed that *'the client places everything on Venue – a better venue idea usually wins out. We spend time looking for really unique venues can give us a design edge'*.

4.11. Creative pitch tactics

Ideas for a fresh pitch often bordered on the extreme. A freelancer said he had done things simply to get the client on board and that would otherwise be unthinkable in other circumstances. A Managing Director of a smaller agency said that they had 'created' ghost pitches as a form of marketing to target key clients. They wanted to get onto the bidding list for a major company who by and large went for bigger agencies only. So they decided to create a PR pitch event for one of the brands under the companies' wing. They then invited key people in the target organisation to the event and used it as 'pitch' to them. Hence the term 'ghost pitch'. One participant expressed the belief that they did things just to gauge the client response, but only in times when they were full with work.

Taking a pitch to extremes was seen by some as a negative, with concern being expressed about possibly damaging a long term client relationship. However some agencies told different pitch stories, and were willing to take a creatively risky approach. Ironically the following example was done precisely to foster a longer term relationship:

Impressing clients is tricky sometime, in these cases you need to be theatrical (industrial theatre) as the pitch is the nearest the client gets to the event itself. This is the one chance to get across to them the experience, seeing visuals, running through it without distractions. It's a chance to get them to have that tingle – so from this point of view you can chance your arm a bit.

Having made this a creative pitch decision, the team then had to pull off the kidnap.

We invited him to our offices, he was then escorted to a dark room, the door was sealed, and in the room were 4 black dressed Victorian candle bearers, standing cross armed. They could not speak to him, all they could do was give a hushed gesture. There was a coffin in the room, covered with cobwebs

and few other creepy things, and eerie music began to play. Projected onto a wall in a 'nightmare on elm street' style font was the words 'the nightmare begins'. He was left to stew for a few minutes. Then we went in as normal. On a word cue about the brief, a candle bearer banged and scratched on the lid of the coffin, the coffin opened and inside was a Lon Chaney/Bela Lugosi character. He held in his hand a document which was a review of the event as it had just happened, painting a bleak black picture of the company – but then suggesting how they would recover. There was a blood red sealed envelope and the guy in the coffin, putting on a creepy Munsters voice, calls him by name, and gives him the pitch document.

This example not only demonstrates the risk some bidders are willing to take with a pitch, but also how they often look at the value of a pitch in short, medium or long term. The fact that internal politics were mentioned by the client at the outset, gave encouragement to the agency to do something risky since in all likelihood they would lose the pitch anyway. But the main point is that they were willing to take a quite extreme route to get across to the client that they could be creative in a way that perhaps other competitors could not. In a similar vein, another example of creative pitching:

We decided to kidnap a client, and sent along a 'mole' who went into the presentation with a tape directing the client down to reception. There we had a guy from our office in black coat, glasses, BMW parked outside, and who could only speak a single word in Russian – niet. He gesticulated for him to get in the car where he got a blackmail letter that told him to go to a certain location. The idea was to use the classic Hollywood black-mailer's scene where the hero goes from point to point collecting information along the way. Finally he ends up at a Hotel room, room 101 of course. This is a 20 minutes story to this point, all checked and timed so run within the time of the pitch. When the door opens to room 101 – we were all inside wearing dark glasses and dark suits. His immediate response was to joke that time had been wasted, but he cracked up laughing and in the end gave us the job.

Here the pitch team had exceeded the brief by impressing the client with their creative flair and organisational skills and delivered a design concept and creative event within a pitch. Significantly they kept to the timeframe they had been given for the pitch but cleverly used that to move the client from his environment into theirs. Such an approach is uncommon and this kind of pitch will only work for a very limited audience and an understanding of the client is crucial before proceeding.

A number of pitches incorporated innovative thinking within the presentation using a variety of techniques. The source below attempted to get an unknown client into their way of thinking.

The pitch was to a German electronics company who we did not know so we used a back-to-basic flipchart to give the impression we had just thought up an idea on the way there. We drew a black square on to a white board which would address different sectors of the events and the company product story. We wanted to take them through our thinking, so showed them how we arrived at the idea. Hidden under the table we had made up scale model of the whole project on a rotating box, and this brought the story to life after the verbal introduction.

Instead of going through their normal routine in this example the agency tried to get the client on their side from the start. It is an illustration of the need to be brave in a pitch and then being prepared to go with the idea.

5. Summary and recommendations

The research indicates that design and creativity is a constant feature in pitching and the extent to which it is used to make an impact is considerable. It underpins both the initial concept stage, as noted in the literature, and the development of event experience. It also influences the style and delivery of the pitch itself. Some agencies were willing to take extravagant risks and give exposure to highly original pitches. Such preparedness to bend the rules of pitching is perhaps high risk but as one person put it 'all you can do is lose the pitch'. Some agencies though were not prepared to deviate too much from the perceived pitch format other than in the level of creativity and conceptual thinking they had for the event.

Client–agency relationship remains a central feature in what goes on in a pitch, although who is 'controlling' who is open to question. Mind games are being played by both clients and agencies. Whatever else emerges from the material here, one thing remains evident, pitches are becoming highly choreographed affairs. Communication operates on multiple levels and sending the right message to the client is paramount. The means to do that though is, of course, what marks one pitch out from another. Daring design elements and bold creativity for the event will only work if the client gets the message and so the pitch has to be clear enough to do that. If the client does not get it, there is little point to the pitch (unless confusion is the point). Different messages are transmitted by different channels of communication and, as is demonstrated in this paper, some of pitches succeed because those channels have been creatively designed to deliver the message in a non-routine way.

What immediately becomes apparent is that there are some process rules that can be followed when pitching. Most of the interviewees acknowledged that they had a fairly well developed routine for responding to requests in the first instance. Within this framework it was largely evident that most EMC's had the knowledge and skills to pitch the type of event the client was requesting. In fact if they did not have evidence of this to begin with they would not be asked to pitch.

This though did not preclude variations to this mutuality with some clients often keen to change the process whether by time, client representation or style of pitch. Often it seemed this was done to get a 'response' from the agency or to test them out. Interestingly while several agencies were happy to play mind games with clients and use extreme tactics, they did not appear to like it when the client did the same to them.

There existed a clear professionalism in the way an agency responds to a brief with a set of meetings held to conceptualise an idea and develop a visual response to the brief. Research on the client, the company, their past events, the likely needs of guests, these were essential elements in helping agencies map out ideas, and is discussed in most sources on the subject. It was important that a connection was made with the client and all interviewees stated that they would try to meet directly with the client prior to the pitch. Here they would try to discover the types of ideas that might be appreciated as well as those that might not be. Hence with so many EMC's having the requisite skill level, it begs the question how would a client differentiate would proposal from another. The answer suggested by this research, is that it is at the pitch level where variation truly emerges as EMC's are able to present design and creative ideas on the event that mark them out as distinct from someone else. Some agencies acknowledged they got contracts because of how they pitched, not because of their ideas for the event.

What can be learnt from these interviews especially for people new to the industry and unfamiliar with the pitching process or those preparing for a pitch? The following main points have emerged:

1. Preparation is required for an event brief that can be either vague and misleading or detailed and specific. As a consequence, EMC's need to ensure they conduct a pre-pitch interview with the client where they must be prepared to ask clarification questions.
2. Before pitching do background research on the client and look at past events and review them critically.
3. Try to pinpoint the buying criteria when meeting the client, establish who will make the decision and what the most important criteria is, e.g. price or concept.
4. Make the pitch an expression of the design ideas for the event. Ensure that the creative concept is clear to the client. Use different media to express this, do not be afraid to use strong 'sense' elements such as touch by bring in a swatch of material to be used in the event design or specific mock-ups of props.
5. Always have a contingency plan for the pitch, as the client can change the rules, e.g. instead of 45 min, it is 20.
6. As a rule, bring a clear idea of the type of venue or venues that would suit the event, and pitch to it/them. Clients like special venues and are often impressed by unique and 'new' discoveries. Show the design of the event in relation to a venue. This can be crucial since a venue can be 'hidden' by decoration if it is a basic space or complementary to the event if it is architecturally interesting.
7. Consider the strategic value of pitching and the third quote syndrome. It can be an effective promotional exercise if the client is someone who regularly holds events and the aim is to make an impression. In this case effusive evidence of creativity and design awareness will at least impact on the client even if it does not win the contract at this time.
8. Research trends and fashion in society as well as events. Be aware of historical links or celebrations that could either be the basis of or incorporated into the design concept. Know what is 'flavour of the month' for creative concepts. If last year it was casino nights, celebrity look-alikes and ice-bars, what is it this year?
9. Think and be prepared to act creatively. Sometimes, providing you have done research on the client, extreme tactics in creative pitching can work. Agencies should not be afraid to challenge assumptions.
10. Think on a psychological level, and consider the interaction in the pitch. Work on design techniques to get favourable responses. Personal interaction between those presenting a pitch can be vital, they must be seen to have a rapport with each other, so design certain elements in the pitch that show this.
11. Rehearse the pitch.
12. Design communication techniques that will get the message across to the client. Do not clutter the message by sending in a troop of people. Keep it clean and simple.

This paper gives some insight into the pitch aspect of bidding for an event that is normally undertaken behind closed doors and is conducted confidentially between client and agency. All primary material here is supplied by narrative accounts from agency people involved in pitching and is, by nature, subjective. More detailed and objective insight into the research, design and creative discussion, is required especially the selection and rejection of ideas, the pitch preparation and pitch delivery could be further developed by, for example, participant observation and real-time tracking of the pitch process. Shadowing a team through a pitch would help detail elements of the process that are not evident here as some of the interviewees were reluctant to fully elaborate on design concepts for the actual events, a result of a combination of confidentiality but also they wanted to keep their advantages secret. There is also no doubt that an exploration of the psychology

used by agencies and clients would shed some interesting light on the different pitch strategies. Furthermore there is scope for a more international study of pitching, to compare and contrast some of the 'issues' uncovered here with other business cultures. Finally there is considerable scope for investigation into client side views of the process and the pitches they receive.

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