1   Events and Business Communication

1   Some definitions

The word event comes from the Latin *eventus*, "occurrence", derived from the verb *evenire*, "to come out, happen, result". An event is thus "something that happens". While etymologically correct, such a definition does not help us to understand what events are and their possible contribution to business communication. To draw attention to the relevance of events with respect to more mundane happenings, some definitions have characterized them as special.

In one of the first contributions in the field, Getz (1991) proposes that "[a] special event is a one-time or infrequently occurring event outside normal programs or activities of the sponsoring or organizing body". This part of the definition is focused on the perspective of the event organizer. However, Getz also considers event participants by suggesting that "[t]o the customer or guest, a special event is an opportunity for a leisure, social or cultural experience outside the normal range of choices or beyond everyday experience". In another of the early attempts to define events, Goldblatt (1990) proposes that "[a] special event is a unique moment in time celebrated with ceremony and ritual to satisfy specific needs". More recently, Matthews (2008) suggests that "[a] special event is a gathering of human beings, generally lasting from a few hours to a few days, designed to celebrate, honor, discuss, sell, teach about, encourage, observe, or influence human endeavors".

These definitions – and the many others that could have been reported – share many similarities, although each of them stresses different elements or characteristics. Over the years, authors of more recently published books have tended to criticize previous definitions and highlight the merits of

their own attempt to characterize events. Others have given up trying to find a definition altogether. For example, Bowdin *et al.* (2001) suggests that "[t]he field of special events is now so vast that it is impossible to provide a definition that includes all variety and shade of events". In this book, I will adopt a similar approach. Instead of proposing a new definition, I will try to draw relevant distinctions between different categories of events.

A first caveat is that not all events may be considered business communication initiatives. Classifications such as those proposed in Figure 1 give an idea of the variety of human initiatives that go under the name of (special) events. This book is mostly concerned with those initiatives labeled "trade/business events" in the figure. However, most of the other typologies of event (e.g., sport, entertainment, etc.) may be interesting as sponsoring opportunities for firms. Moreover, event formats developed in the context of other typologies of events may serve as sources of inspiration for business initiatives. Even within the field of business events, many distinctions may be drawn. One set of discriminators regards event's targets and objectives, while another focuses on the characteristics of the initiatives themselves.

Figure 1   Event classification

Cultural celebration
- Festivals
- Carnival
- Religious events
- Parades
- Heritage
- Commemorations

Art/Entertainment
- Concerts
- Other performances
- Exhibits
- Award ceremonies

Business/Trade
- Fairs, markets, sales
- Consumer & trade shows
- Meeting/Conferences
- Publicity events
- Fundraiser events

Sport competitions
- Professional
- Amateur

Educational/Scientific
- Seminarsm workshops
- Congresses
- Interpretative events

Recreational
- Games & sports
- Amusement events

Political/State
- Inaugurations
- Investitures
- VIP visits
- Rallies

Private events

Personal celebrations
- Anniversaires
- Family holidays
- Rites of passage

Social events
- Parties
- Reunions

Source: Adapted from Getz (1997)

2   Relevant distinctions (i): Objectives and targets

The present book is mostly concerned with events as marketing communication initiatives. As shown in Table 1, not all business events are marketing events. However, most of the ideas and conceptual models discussed in this book with reference to marketing events can be easily adapted to other areas of business communication.

Table 1   Events according to areas of business communication

Area	Typical target groups	Typical objectives/contents
Marketing communication	• Customers • Retailers • Influencers • Media	Communication about: • Products • Brands
Internal communication	• Human resources • Sales force • Retailers	• Strengthening internal relationships and organizational culture
Financial communication	• Investors • Analysts	Communication about: • Performances • The firm and its strategy
Corporate communication	• Public opinion • Policy makers	• Communication about corporate social responsibility • Legitimizing the firm in its socio-political environment

Source: Adapted from Golfetto (1993)

2.1   *Marketing communication events*

Marketing communication (MARCOM) events are those aimed at building and/or strengthening relationships with the market. Typical targets include customers (whether consumers or industrial buyers), retailers, opinion leaders and influencers, including the media. Events may be employed to obtain a wide range of MARCOM objectives, such as providing information about a product's attributes and benefits, obtaining media coverage, increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, increasing sales, fostering brand loyalty. Examples of marketing events include the following typologies (Wood 2009):

- Incentive/reward events offered to the sales force or distributors as a bonus for achievements.
- Conferences, meetings and seminars organized as marketing communication vehicles.
- Branding events developed to carry out the brand values.
- Corporate entertainment events, employed to entertain and/or reward clients and partners (e.g. golf days, theatre performances, etc.).
- Charity fundraisers used for cause-related marketing.
- Product launches developed to draw attention to the development or improvement of a product, and targeting the media, retailers and/or consumers.
- Product sampling developed to create the opportunity to try or experience a product or service (often combined with product launches).
- Road shows, i.e. mobile events which spread the brand message to different locations.
- Exhibitions, ranging from trade and consumer shows to art exhibitions related to a specific brand.
- Publicity events designed to gain maximum media exposure sometimes with unusual or controversial activities linked to the product/brand.
- Press conferences inviting the press to hear about some important or newsworthy development related to the company/product/brand.
- Competitions/contests, i.e. events created around some form of contest and somehow linked to the brand.

In many countries, available statistics show that the share of promotional budget invested in events is rising. There are many reasons that explain the relative success enjoyed by events in the marketing communication mix. Firstly, advertising has lost its hegemony, as consumers have become increasingly marketing-savvy and more difficult to influence with advertising in traditional media (i.e., television, radio, the press). As a consequence, the investment in the so-called below-the-line has increased as marketers have tried to become more creative and started experimenting with a wide range of promotional activities including, among others, sales promotions, public relations, direct marketing, and sponsorship.

Events are, then, just the latecomers in a series of MARCOM instruments that began to challenge the predominance of advertising in the communication mix. As paradoxical as it might appear, two areas of below-the-line that are enjoying high levels of success are online initiatives and live communication. The Internet and related developments (search engines, social networks, virtual worlds, etc.) have opened up a universe of interaction opportunities that is not constrained by physical distance to consumers and industrial buyers. However, despite alarmist predictions that meeting and event industries could have been severely affected by these developments, the need to touch products and look into the eyes of other people when conducting important business and consumption activities has not diminished.

A fertile ground for the diffusion of events has also been provided by some important trends that have revolutionized the traditional marketing concept. In the early 1990s, relationship marketing, by recognizing the relevance of customer satisfaction and retention, legitimized live communication in business-to-business contexts. By hosting events and attending trade shows, companies established more intimate relationships with current and potential buyers in both industrial and retailing settings. More recently, both experiential and guerrilla marketing approaches have contributed to the establishment of events as viable communication tools.

What is known as "experience marketing" stems from early academic work in the 1980s that addressed the over-rationalized view of consumers as utility-maximizing actors by suggesting that consumer behavior may be motivated by "fantasy, feelings and fun" (Holbrook and Hirschmann 1982). It was only at the end of the 1990s that bestselling management books popularized experiences as a new category of high-value marketing and proposed that by making products and services more experiential companies could obtain a sustainable competitive advantage (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Similarly, Schmitt (1999b) popularized an experiential approach to marketing by highlighting the basic ingredients of experiences (i.e., sensorial, emotional, cognitive, relational and behavioral stimulation) that should be orchestrated to engage consumers and differentiate a brand. According to Schmitt (1999b), most marketing communication instruments can be designed to be more experiential. However, since events entail immersion of participants into a real-life setting, they lend themselves to more intense experiences than, say, advertising or web site browsing. Events are, thus, the ultimate playground for staging creative brand experiences.

Guerrilla marketing is an approach to unconventional communication that aims to achieve promotional goals through imaginative activities rather than through a substantial budget (Levinson 1999; Cova, Giordano and Pallera 2008; Uslenghi and Brioschi 2009). The term guerrilla (literally small war) is derived from the military jargon and refers to an irregular force that fights a larger and better organized army through sabotage and harassment. In a marketing context, the term refers to the unexpected low-budget promotional activities carried out by emerging brands that cannot afford advertising in traditional media. With the diffusion of this approach, established brands that could count on significant budgets have also adopted guerrilla marketing techniques.

Many guerrilla marketing activities are based on the staging of events or pseudo-events that, ideally, should attract the attention of consumers and the media and amplify their reach through news articles and word-of-mouth (both offline and online). The creative ideas for some of these activities are often generated in artistic and countercultural milieu and are only appropriated by the corporate world later. Examples of event-based guerrilla marketing activities include flash mobs and stealth performances (see also par. 3.2).

Marketing approaches based on relationships, experience and guerrilla tactics have contributed to moving brands away from the traditional approach based on exposing targets to messages and buying media influence. The focus is now on fostering a connection between members of the target group and the brand (or the company) and its representatives, stimulating interaction and creating engagement. With this new logic, previous activities such as trade shows, sponsorships, guerrilla marketing initiatives, meetings, conferences and press briefings have become more experiential and merged together in the field of event marketing.

2.2   *Other business communication events*

Internal communication events target the company's human resources. Examples include conventions, meetings for the sales force, organizational ceremonies, parties and leisure events, workshops, and training events. Some internal events have a continuing professional development focus and aim to transfer formal knowledge and skills to employees. To facilitate training, these initiatives sometimes adopt innovative formats outside the

classroom (i.e. "outdoor training"), particularly when attempting to foster the experiential learning of soft skills (e.g., leadership, working in groups, problem solving, etc.). Other events aim to strengthen relationships and reciprocal trust among organizational members. However, with varying emphasis, learning and team building are present in most internal communication events.

Other initiatives have broader goals. Scholars in organizational behavior have long studied the role played by ceremonies and rituals in the creation of strong organizational culture (e.g., Trice and Beyer 1984). Through events that involve the entire workforce or selected parts of it (e.g. conventions), companies deploy organizational symbolism, foster socialization among employees, share values and deliver key messages for organizational life. Events of this kind are particularly relevant in times of strategic change, as public speeches by organizational leaders together with music, lighting, audiovisuals etc. result in emotionally-charged performances that generate a powerful impact on staff perceptions and behaviors. Events are also very important after mergers and acquisitions as, in these exceptional moments in organizational life, a new culture has to be created or, alternatively, one of the organizations has to be assimilated into a dominant corporate culture.

Financial communication events support relationships with the financial market. This area of business communication aims to demonstrate the firm's capability to exploit the financial resources obtained from investors and support non-ordinary financial operations. Security analysts, who evaluate the financial value and future profitability of listed companies, are important targets of these events. The information communicated regards both past financial performance and future strategies. Examples of events pertaining to financial communication include road shows supporting initial public stock offerings and annual shareholder meetings.

Corporate communication events are used to legitimize the firm and its activities in the broader socio-political environment. By fostering acceptance and goodwill towards the firm, corporate communication has a favorable influence on all other areas of business communication. One type of communication events provides information about the company's position and social responsibility (CSR). CSR is an approach to business that attempts to reduce negative impacts on the environment, consumers, employees, communities and stakeholders in general. Scholars in management debate whether firms, as profit-making institutions, should engage in this kind of

behavior or leave these concerns to other bodies such as the state or NGOs. Most CSR initiatives are likely to achieve positive results (e.g., consumer willingness to pay higher prices, better brand associations) only to the extent that they are communicated to relevant audiences. To this end, events (often in partnership with non profit-making organizations) are becoming an increasingly popular. Examples include open days, inaugurations, leisure and cultural events, presentations of CSR initiatives, and sponsorships of social/cultural/sporting events.

Another typology of corporate communication initiative focuses on public policy around issues that may affect corporate interests. Events for lobbying purposes target public officials and civil servants and often include recreational elements. In some countries, because of the potential conflicts of interest, sponsoring organizations have to report these events and the attendance lists to official control authorities. In other cases, firms may try to influence public debate on issues through informational events such as conferences or roundtables.

3   Relevant distinctions (ii): Event characteristics

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate events from other types of business communication initiatives. Moreover, events are so heterogeneous that some of them hardly resemble each other. In this section, attention is drawn to some key characteristics that allow us to differentiate between different typologies of events on the one hand, and between events and other communication instruments on the other.

As previously seen, early definitions stressed the special character and uniqueness of events. A first distinction that can be made is, therefore, between truly unique events and repetitive events. Examples of unique events are corporate anniversaries or new product launches. Each of these initiatives are considered one-of-a-kind, even though during its lifespan the same company will certainly celebrate more than one anniversary or launch several dozen new products. In other cases, events take place regularly at more or less fixed intervals of time. For example, in the clothing industry fashion shows are organized every six months to launch spring/ summer and fall/winter collections. Similarly, most trade fairs are held once a year or, in industries where innovation cycles are longer, once every two to four years. In these cases, one challenge event managers have to

face is making each event unique in order to avoid a sense of *dejà vu* among attendees.

Another internal distinction that can be noted is between spectacular events that use light, sound and music, audiovisuals, stage design and other techniques borrowed from the performing arts, as well as television and cinema to create dramatic effects, and those more ordinary initiatives that do not use such modes.

Fashion shows are a good example of spectacular events, whereas most press conferences exemplify a much less exciting type of initiative where key messages are conveyed without much fanfare. Borrowing from the ideas of scholars such as Eco and Baudrillard, spectacular marketing events have been defined as "3-dimensional, brand-related hyper-realities in which consumers are actively involved on a behavioural level and which would result in their emotional attachment to the brand" (Wohfeil and Whelan 2006). Simply put, the fantasy worlds and themes employed in brand advertising are transformed into real experiences through a creative dramaturgy that captures the imagination of participants and sets the event apart from everyday activities. In social sciences, the spectacular has been proposed by many scholars as a key category to understand contemporary society, economy and politics. Consequently, it is no surprise that over the years, business communication events have become increasingly spectacular in order to trigger emotional responses from their audiences and achieve corporate goals.

External distinctions between events and other forms of communication tool are sometimes hard to make. Events lend themselves to the achievement of a broad range of objectives, and, as a result, have been included in the array of techniques employed in many areas of marketing, including, among others, promotions, public relationships, guerrilla marketing, experiential marketing, retailing, sales, and customer relationship management. Initiatives such as street sampling, in-store promotions or temporary stores may, for example, be considered as forms of sales promotions or full-fledged events. Hybrid initiatives that are based on the synergy between live elements and other forms of communication are becoming increasingly common. For example, a television commercial may feature a customer as a spokesperson, selected through a nation-wide consumer contest. Other events may mix live initiatives with online activities.

With the advent of the Internet and other new communication technologies, many types of "virtual event" have started to appear. This is the case

of webinars, virtual conferences and trade shows, or new product launches in Second Life. For many, events are necessarily gatherings of human beings in the "real" world, and cyber-initiatives, no matter how interactive, are a different kind of communication tool. However, younger generations of consumers and professionals alike are increasingly used to virtual modes of interaction. Moreover, the virtual channel can significantly decrease the participation costs and increase the reach of international events. Consequently, these technologies may completely transform the meeting, trade fair, event and live communication industries in the future.

In a number of areas, associations of event agencies and professionals have defined events in terms that reflect broader processes aimed at legitimizing their field of activity and building a market for their services. As a result, some initiatives (e.g., the less spectacular press conferences) may be excluded from the scope of some associations, while other more debatable actions (e.g. virtual events) may be included for pragmatic reasons.

4   Perspectives on events and plan of the book

Practical and theoretical knowledge of events has developed in different contexts. Table 2 shows the main perspectives in event management that are relevant to the goals of this study. Some stress the production-side, i.e. the decisions that firms and event agencies have to make and the activities they have to offer in order to manage events effectively. Others are more focused on the demand-side, i.e. the experiences of consumers. From a marketing point of view, the two aspects are inter-twined, as event management should always be based on knowledge of the target audience's needs, motivations and preferences.

The first perspective on the management of events views these activities as communication initiatives that should deliver certain messages to specific target audiences. The theoretical basis of the conceptual tools in this area are found in the managerial models to manage advertising and other communication channels, together with a few adaptations to the specificities of events. From this angle, event management is a process that comprises of several phases, each of which sees the involvement of different subjects (the firm, the event agency, suppliers). Key managerial challenges include goal setting, targeting, delivering a message, budgeting. Given the novelty of events as business communication instruments,

professionals in the field are still debating the most appropriate metrics to measure event results, with suggestions ranging from simple attendance figures to returns on marketing investments. Guidance on these issues should be provided by scientific research on participant response, which, unfortunately, is still in an embryonic phase. All these aspects are addressed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3, written by Alessandra Lanza, deal with the fact that events are communication tools which, in turn, require communication. The chapter analyzes, from a marketing communication perspective, key professional roles, logics, and instruments to communicate effectively marketing events so that they can produce results.

Table 2   Main perspectives in event management

Events as…	Bodies of knowledge	Key aspects
Communication instruments	• Managerial models to manage Integrated Marketing Communications • Research on audience response	• Event process • Key managerial challenges • Measuring event results • Communicating events
Experiences	• Managerial models to manage customer experiences • Research on participant experiences	• Typologies of event experiences • "Ingredients" of event experiences • Event experience lifecycle
Rituals	• Theories of rituals and culture in anthropology and sociology	Events as dramatic activities that facilitate sense-making, foster community and stimulate the emergence of conflicts
Projects	• Engineering models to manage complex activities	• Project management tools • Risk management tools

The second perspective focuses on the experiences of participants. Rather than focusing only on the delivery of messages, this view has developed conceptual tools to design memorable event experiences that involve target audiences as active participants and facilitate engagement with the brand. In marketing, the experiential view has produced several categorizations of experiences and the "ingredients" that may be leveraged to design events effectively. Among other aspects, contributions in this field have emphasized the temporal horizon of experiences, which should be managed with appropriate communication tools both before and after the actual event. To date, there are few studies on event experiences (as is true also for par-

ticipant response), but they provide insights into the effectiveness of live communication in building stronger brands. These issues are considered in Chapter 4.

A third perspective sees events as rituals. The theoretical background for this perspective lies in the work developed by anthropologists and sociologists, and offers tools to understand the cultural aspects of organizational, professional and consumer behavior. Events reproduce cultural meanings and memory and materialize symbols and narratives. Theories of rituals also highlight the role events play in the creation and maintenance of the social structure. Seen in this light, events are strategically employed by social actors to make sense of the world and define courses of action. Events also create social solidarity and foster a sense of community among participants. However, they are also a vehicle through which dominant groups naturalize the status quo and their domination of the less powerful. As a result, conflicts between social groups may emerge during these initiatives. These questions, together with their managerial implications, are treated in Chapter 5.

Finally, events may also be seen as projects. Given the temporary nature of events and the unique characteristics that set them apart from the usually repetitive business operations, project management tools have been successfully adapted to the field of event planning and coordination. The same thing happened with tools aimed to assess and reduce the likelihood and/or impact of event risks. These aspects are covered in Chapter 6.

Live marketing communication initiatives are not limited to proprietary, stand-alone events. Firms often promote themselves in the context of collective marketing initiatives, such as trade fairs. In these cases, firms are not alone in their communication endeavors, because other companies are trying to capture the time and attention of the same target audiences at the same time. The largest trade fairs convene hundreds – if not thousands – of exhibitors, most of whom are direct competitors. Chapter 7 explores these collective marketing events and their specific managerial challenges .

Finally, local governments have, in the last decades, increasingly adopted events as instruments (and sometimes cornerstones) to foster urban renewal and economic development. This is particularly evident in the growing international competition to attract itinerant mega events such as the Olympic Games or the World Expos. Proponents highlight the economic and image impacts of these large-scale initiatives for the host