

All quiet on the western front

DOUG SACKS reports on last month's annual DMDays event in New York.

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I'm just back from DMDays New York, the USA DMA's summer conference.

I saw a few people, such as Simon Burrell of Newsweek and Nick Martin of Acxiom (who were both panelists) . . . but I didn't see many others.

Maybe it was the weather, which was very hot. But the great cavernous Javits Center looked like to me like a great big empty!

That was OK for me; I'm easy. Any time a group of marketers get together and I can schedule some meetings in advance and then chance serendipitously on a few more on site - I'm happy.

But I wouldn't imagine the speakers or the exhibitors were very happy.

To be kind, the floor traffic was light. It was evocative of one of those ghost towns out west. And by west, I don't mean Bristol! I expected to have to dodge the tumbleweed as it swept down very empty aisles.

I think I saw a cow's skull sparkling in the sunlight. Perhaps that was my imagination.

What I didn't imagine was seeing exhibitors talking enthusiastically - to each other. One booth was giving out rubber balls and the guy manning the booth was juggling them to pass the time.

Dark side of the moon

Word has it (unconfirmed), that DM Days in 2010 will move to a smaller and more central location. DMDaysNY was once a lively but largely local event for marketers in the NY metro area. It was held at the Hilton Hotel. Unlike the Javits Center, this was a great location. But the

exhibit hall was spread out over several floors and some of it looked like a Moroccan kasbah . . . or at least the lanes in Brighton. If you were stuck at the end of one of those lanes, no-one could find you.

So, it grew and was taken over by the US DMA and moved to the huge Javits Center, which is located, for all intents and purposes, on the dark side of the moon. Difficult to get to, impossible to get from at the end of the day. No hotels or eateries nearby.

It is universally hated by all. One associate calls it "the worst location on earth". Sounds a bit harsh, but I assure you that you would feel the same if you had to schlep there for three consecutive days.

And that's another problem. It's three days' long. Way too long from an exhibitor's standpoint.

Now, I have nothing against the DMA (well, not this month anyway!). But it seems it goes out of its way to make this event inconvenient and inhospitable.

Besides the dreadful location, there were a number of little things that really were awful . . . There was an area of 35 tables, each holding up to ten people, to be used sporadically for presentations. Mostly it was empty, so people congregated there as a convenient spot for business meetings. But the sound system was on continuously with very loud and annoying background music. So one really couldn't conduct a decent meeting or hold any type of conversation with that going on. When my group complained, we were told this was a 'play area', whatever that is, and the

music would stay. It stopped only long enough for ear-shattering announcements. Retreating to the food court to find meeting space, one was once again bombarded with TVs blasting. Worse, only half the food stalls were open. Another big empty.

On the exhibit floor, many booths were never set up so there were a lot empty spaces signified by blank red and black curtains. Probably companies reserved space but then decided not to spend the money. That looked depressing.

This year, the independent events known as List Day, Direct and International Day were folded into the last day of DMDays, with disastrous results.

The idea of combining events (plus awards dinners and so on) made the event quite expensive for any company that considered sending different people to different events.

Competing for attendees with each other as well as the concurrent DMDays sessions, attendance at these sessions was always under 20 people and often under ten. The rooms were set up to accommodate 50-100 people, so the sessions looked empty and depressing.

Best attended

I stayed for the last session on the last day - more out of loyalty to Simon and Nick (as mentioned at the start of this column) than anything. I didn't want them speaking to an empty house! But their session was by far the best attended of that day's events and theirs was an excellent session, focusing upon the current and future trends in DM in Europe. Other panelists

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included Terry Hunt and Peter Price. Bruce Biegel acted as moderator. I found it very informative, at least for the part I could hear . . . their session started at 3pm, the same time the booths were being broken down. So right outside the door of the meeting room, you could hear forklifts squealing, workmen rolling up carpet, and so on. Not very classy or courteous to the speakers.

Next year, the opening keynote speaker will be . . . Ivanka Trump, daughter of 'The Donald' and Ivana Trump. I can't imagine the theme of her presentation. Maybe: "I was born with a \$100 million trust fund and I'm sorry you weren't?"

So, one must raise the question? Should there even be a DMDays event any more? Or has it run its course? It's only four months away from the DMA Annual event. Perhaps one event is enough now. Perhaps exhibitors can't justify the expense of manning a booth for three days during the dog days of June.

If enough exhibitors pull out of the event, then it will die. If they continue to pay up, then it shall survive. Maybe the idea of moving to a smaller, more convenient location is the answer. I think there is a need for events where marketers can meet, learn and do business. But the present model, like an old car, is tired, breaking down and needs a complete overhaul.

Prof Douglas Sacks is VP, strategic planning, for Focus Worldwide and is an assistant professor of marketing at New York University. email: doug@focus-worldwide.com