

Independent organiser

Emap, CMP, Reed, et al hit the headlines on a regular basis, but what about the independent organisers that aren't so high profile but, nonetheless, turn out important shows for their sector? In our regular series profiling these perfectly formed operators, we talk to Suzanne Borrell of SMB Events.

SMB Events was established in 2007 by Suzanne Borrell. The company is based in Hove and organises Brighton Baby Expo, which was launched in June 2008.

What is the concept behind your company?

SMB Events is a small company consisting of myself and four freelance staff. It was set up to launch events outside of London and the major cities, but of a national quality. Having been in this industry since 1997 I have been to many events outside of London which aren't of the same quality as those in the city and I wanted to set up a company that could organise high quality events in the home counties.

What drives you to launch shows in specific sectors?

The Brighton Baby Expo is a show that is very close to my heart as I have a young child and am pregnant with my second. I realised that in Brighton, and the surrounding areas, there are many expectant parents who re-locate here from the city to have their children, but that wouldn't want to travel to London to a baby show, so it was an ideal location for a show in this sector. However, for me, having a successful business model is more important than the sector of the show I am organising.

Do you have an exit strategy?

It is still very early days with Brighton Baby Expo. Having just had a successful first show I would like to continue to develop the show responding to this success to create something that myself and team can be really proud of. If a big player showed an interest in the show, I would always listen to what they had to say, but it isn't my immediate plan to develop it and then sell on.

What are the advantages of being an

independent organiser?

You can offer more flexibility in working time to yourself and your staff: we are all parents so this is imperative. It is much more hands-on than it would be being a small piece of the jigsaw in a big corporation. There is no pressure from investors so we can take our time to make the right decisions, but also this means there is no board or strict procedures, so if we need to make decisions quickly we have that flexibility. There is great camaraderie and loyalty.

What challenges do you face as an independent organiser?

It is a steep learning curve and there is no back up from a big organisation, so you are more reliant on yourself and your team. Because of this everything is a lot more personal and so it means I work a lot harder on things. Risk taking is a lot more personal also, and work becomes an integral part of your life. But the benefits by far outweigh the challenges.

How do you market your show, as an independent organiser?

The best marketing tool is networking and developing relationships with key people relevant to the sector. Our marketing strategy involved advertising and editorial in industry and consumer press as well as contra deals.

Was your first launch profitable?

I didn't launch this show thinking I was going to make a lot of money, and most organisers don't on a launch. Brighton Baby Expo was profitable and achieved more than I had imagined.

What is the key to success in this industry?

Hard work, consistency and keeping your ear to the ground. It is all about making connections as reputation is everything.

The M&A Files

Steve Monnington of Mayfield Media Strategies presents a step by step guide to selling your business

Part One: Before you decide to sell

In a small company it is normal to make major decisions quickly. However, the results of these



decisions can have a major impact on the value of your business when you decide to sell, or could even make it un-sellable. Once you establish your business you must consider every major decision, especially if it involves other partners or associations, everything must be documented legally.

We have been involved with a business that created a complex portfolio that proved too complicated for potential purchasers. As well as their main exhibition, which was owned 100 per cent, they had acquired a minority stake in a related but semi-competitive event. There was also a management contract for other shows, a 50 per cent stake in a publishing company and a travel agency set up for the exhibitors' travel and accommodation spend.

The publishing business couldn't be sold without the approval of the joint venture partner, which was only given on the proviso that they received more for their 50 per cent than any purchaser would offer and there was no control over the minority owned exhibition. Management contracts are never valued as highly as owned events because of the risk of non renewal.

You must create a logical uncomplicated structure and put non-core business into a separate company. Very few purchasers are interested in non-exhibition or non-publishing business.

If you have trade and consumer shows, you need to consider very few purchasers are interested in both, so structure your business so that different parts can be sold off if necessary. If you create more than one trade show and think you may sell them at different times you should also put them in separate companies otherwise you will pay more tax than you need to.