



Andrew 0:00

Welcome everybody to “In the loop” with Andrew and today we're speaking with Maria Ryder who is the Director of Sales and Marketing for a company called Exclusive Event Solutions GmbH that has five divisions, we're going to concentrate on meeting and events. Maria, firstly, thank you for doing this and for coming along. Can you tell the listeners a little bit about you and the company?

Maria 0:30

Absolutely, Exclusive Event Solutions is a company that was founded at the beginning of 2020 in Switzerland. However, we have been running for over 17 years in total, I've got Swiss grandparents, and a Swiss mother, a lot of Swiss roots. However, I grew up in South Africa, and my husband and I sold our business there after 16 years. We have two small children and decided to emigrate to Switzerland, so that they could become Swiss and get to be part of the system from a young age. We have always been passionate about meetings and events, you have to be a really special type of person to survive in this industry, and to be able to create a business that is sustainable. It's always not just now, it's always been a challenging, but exceptionally rewarding industry to be in. We're enjoying our time here in Switzerland, and we are finding that the future is much brighter than people anticipate.

Andrew 2:04

I would actually agree with you. From your side, obviously, you have been organizing a lot of corporate events, weddings and other functions, etc. If we go back a little bit, and just from your point of view, what is the actual secret to organizing a successful and memorable meeting, or event or private party?

Maria 2:20

I think what everybody underestimates is detail. I tell any new staff member or team member, that detail is absolutely key. It alleviates so many problems. When you think your function sheets and your planning and everything is 100% detailed, you can go back and find more detail that you need to add in, those briefing meetings post event with the client, with the team. They're absolutely essential. Meetings with the venue and the staff, they are really essential. And when I say that assumption is I'll put it nicely because it's a podcast. Essentially, assumptions are one of the greatest reasons for errors or flaws that occur in any conference or event or even a wedding or a party, you can't assume anything, you've got to check absolutely every single element. The moment that you think that's being organized, or that this will happen, or that will happen, or this is how it's been done before, that is where the cracks come in. So no assumptions, lots of detail and communication, communication with your team, communication with the customer.

I think a big learning for me over the years is that honesty is paramount to any successful event. Being honest with your customer, being honest with your venue, managing expectations. Communication and honesty work hand in hand and ensure alignment so that they aren't duplications of tasks, so that tasks are not skipped or missed. It increases speed, it increases efficiency, and it allows for flexibility. That I'd say is one of the last points is the need to be flexible in this industry. Things are constantly changing as



any event or conference does not stand still. It is not a science. It is not created in the lab. It's like a theatre or a ballet production. It's a work of art. It is essential to be able to adjust as the circumstances change. We're dealing with humans and the most incredible thing is that when they come on conference, they don't know how to pack for themselves. They forget how to catch a train or get onto a bus or even what they eat or that they need to be on time. Attendees become your children, so it's like having two or three or 500 children at a conference, and you need to be flexible and adaptable. I think the last thing to create a successful conference or event is to really be like a duck on the top of the water, you and your team must look like everything is calm and in control even if your legs are very active underneath. So those are a few tips that we like to follow.

Andrew 5:07

Well I think the duck analogy actually is a really good one, fantastic in fact. From your side, I know, as well, at events, there is a flux of staff coming in staff coming out, possibly as well, you've got the resources from suppliers, trying to be in three places at once, or on four phone conversations at the same time. How do you actually sort of manage that aspect of it?

Maria 5:32

I think the team you have is really important, we've never had the philosophy that you can run an event with one or two people, we are exceptionally hands on. You can have a core event manager that does all your planning and pre prep and function sheets etc. but they need to be on site. There needs to be continuity of that person and their communication. Then on site, the team is really important and each team member is not assigned only to their tasks, they need to understand the holistic event and the whole event, not only their specific little element. We've had functions where the venue staff have been shocking, the service was just not good enough for a gala dinner. An example, one for 350 people, the service was too slow. I had to involve the AV technicians, my accountant, the event managers, the sales team, the Director of Finance and Ops. We rushed in serving drinks, serving food, clearing plates, getting out the next course and the clients thought it was fantastic. Everybody had a great meal, but nobody was too good to do the job of a waiter or a waitress. So to answer your question, in order to multitask, everybody on site must be able to perform multiple roles, and not only one role. In saying that, we believe your titles are more to give your customer the faith that you can do your job. We don't believe in titles, a flatter structure is the more important. One where you are part of a team and you've got various capabilities, abilities, capacities, and the know how to perform multiple tasks when required.

Andrew 7:21

I think if you talk to a very good F&B Director in a hotel, it's the same sort of attitude. You can always see in good hotels, the GM, the hotel General Manager going around picking up litter scraps and checking on everything else. He's just making sure his hotel domain is absolutely A1 for when the guest arrives. I can totally understand that thinking and the regard to service orientation. It also means that later you get another referral from the someone who enjoyed the experience. So from from your side, you were in South Africa, you've come to Switzerland. What do you think you will bring here?



Maria 8:06

It's a very good question. I think that, as I mentioned, being hands on was probably one of our most differentiating factors. We never ran an event or conference from behind a conference desk. And we were on the floor, we were checking hotel rooms, we were helping with turn around so that we could get early chickens. We were meeting them at the airport and doing meet and greets and making sure that the rooms were correctly branded, and that the service from the catering and beverage perspectives was right. So being hands on mopping floors, cleaning floors, that was absolutely crucial. That friendliness, customization, flexibility on site was key and then I think being a pretty much a turnkey solution company caused a big jump in the success of the business.

A conception to completion agency, where we could really provide all the solutions. Like with our business now, we've got mobile bars, we've got a branding and design division, all of these in house, a team building, decor hiring, event management and conference management. I think having all these different divisions means that you rely less on your supplier network and you can ensure quality to a greater level. It's less vendors for your customers. However, I do not discredit for a second that we are only as good as our supply chain. We are only as good as finding the right suppliers, managing them correctly and making sure that they have the same levels of quality and delivery as we do.

We can differentiate ourselves as much as possible, but we need to make sure that the support team is as good as we are. Then I also think we are very good at changing, adapting and evolving. That is really important now more than ever, but we found that our business has been shaped and chiselled by our clients requirements and by not being so concrete and set in stone in our offerings and our views. We will have a customer who wants something specific, we don't say, Sorry, we don't provide it. We say, of course, we can provide it, let's research it, find out how to do it, find the best people to do it and then yes, absolutely, we can do it for you. That's been a huge differentiating factor for us.

Andrew 10:32

And with regards to that, obviously in the past, when you're doing events, the concept you can put 100 people 200, 300, 400, whatever the number together. Now we are in COVID times and I know from the networking group, what's happened and how people feel, etc. From your side for meetings, events and incentive type award nights. What are you doing now, that's very, very different to what it was you were doing maybe 12 or 18 months ago?

Maria 11:09

It is very different and it's obviously challenging, but there are certainly solutions for it. How I see it is that the impact of COVID is almost like the progression for event experiences. If you look at a car, we've gone from combustion engines, to electric engines, but we're not fully electric yet. So, if you look like at a hybrid, I believe hybrid events is the current best solution for our industry. We have to go online, we have to go digital, we do have many online and digital solutions. But we are still human and face to face interaction and contact cannot be replaced 100%. So now we are focusing on decentralized events.



Think about it, you go to a gala dinner of 400 people or 200 people, you're only going to really have quality interactions with maybe 10, maybe 12. If you drink a lot of wine, maybe twenty. We can just decentralize those events. What we've been creating for customers is either finding locations where all the different teams can have their own conferencing location. They get it done as a team but in various locations, or in totally different locations. Some can be in Bern, some are in Zurich, and others are on Lake Lucerne, or others are in the mountains, depending on what you're trying to achieve.

The focus, I think, is moving to experiences and exclusive experiences, smaller groups, better interaction, more quality engagement, and just keeping it decentralized and small. Then you are using your online portals for efficient communication. For long distance. I mean to travel six or nine hours for a meeting, yes, that will change and needs to be where you can hear a presenter from your own home. But remember to engage with your customers face to face and really form relationships, you still need to be in front of them. For colleagues to strategize and to brainstorm, to form those bonds that then work online afterwards, you still need to be in front of them. Decentralized eventing and this hybrid with some fun things.

One of our customers said, we need to do a sales conference, we said, okay, cool. We've done lots of those. The client said it doesn't just work for them online. So they agreed to have sessions online, you can have your presenters online, with a green screen in the back, etc. But every morning, thanks to the efficiency of the Swiss Post, packs arrive at the guy's door with special fun things for that day. Things they would have at a normal conference. The little pack keeps them interested and excited. Doing an online team event where we would normally do a master chef competition with a team and friends. It is replaced, they get a mystery box delivered to the door. Now they're creating the dish from that mystery box with all the teams working together online. It has still got some tangible, real aspects to it. It is not the complete experience.

Andrew 14:23

That is very clever. I was reading about another event where literally they had 20 dinner parties throughout the world, how it was organized for time zones and all the other stuff I do not know. I have also seen Disney do a launch for a movie and been part of the tech team supplying to them. You see then the event organization as a top umbrella.

You also just think No, that's just stress load overload. So that's why I asked, there are solutions people have got them. And I just do not think this sort of positive news is coming out so that people can hear it. I think it's brilliant that you're doing this.

Maria 15:05

I think we need to embrace it and we need to adjust. Then also, I think that it is really important that we support the local industry for COVID. Everything can go digital, but then a massive, massive part of the sector in Switzerland users their jobs and loses their income. Let us use the hotels, let us use these beautiful locations, in a safe, compliant manner. We recently, which, when it's really I'll let you know,



have a very exciting collaboration going on. A massive new project near Zurich on the outskirts of Zurich, and every conference room in the venue is being built so that it is 100% COVID compliant. It will have all the correct registration, legislation, regulations in force with air filtration systems, spatial distancing and the perspex dividers. It can be a fully functional conference venue, there's multiple meeting rooms, all COVID safety friendly. We have got to look at these kinds of solutions, but still get people out of their pyjamas, out of the house away from their kids, for a period of time.

Andrew 16:19

And off social media, LinkedIn and all the other social media rubbish that we have got as well. Maria, from your side, obviously, we have got the multiple divisions but we're concentrating on the events at the moment. If there is one tip, from your experience, for some person who's planning for Christmas, apart from ringing you for advice on what to do of course, what would you say to that person? Say, someone who has just been approached by the CEO and asked them to organize the event.

Maria 16:52

I think the most important aspect is to understand your customer and not to go into a briefing meeting by selling yourself by asking the questions, find out who that customer is, what do they like? What do they not like? What are the little niggly things that annoy them about a Christmas dinner? What are the things that they love? What are the good experiences they have had so that you can repeat them? What were the bad ones that they have had so that you can eliminate them? What are the ones that they would like to continue? Like a stop, start, continue approach. I think a lot of customers or even suppliers that sell to me are so busy selling themselves that they forget to find out who they are selling to. If you get to know your customer, and form a relationship with them and understand them, then you can give them a good product or a really good solution.

It is so important. I mean, experiential eventing has been around for a while. It is going to become more and more important now. I think because everybody has this flood of marketing online, everywhere they go people are trying to sell to them online. How do you differentiate yourselves from a pharmaceutical company to an events company to anyone, it is by creating experiences? What we find is crucial with experiential experiences is event ecosystem. Really, what that is about is creating opportunities for engagement, leveraging those opportunities, so that your pre and post communication is crucial. When starting a conversation with your customer.

It is about creating an overarching proposition. These experiential touch points that are throughout the ecosystem and that have longevity. For example, we did a super cool thing where everybody was excited for a year end function, there was about 2000 people. It was for Siemens, which are a major, major player in digitalization and an incredible company to work with. The whole stage and seats and everything that was built was built so that it could be sustainable. After the event, it could actually be cut down, remoulded and made into gifts for everybody that attended. All the employees got stationery etc for their desk. Instead of throwing away this whole stage, you were left with a bit of that function for the next a year or two.



I think the post experience is as important as the pre experience and the experience itself. Creating this leverage and the consistency and putting these memorable moments together. People advertise about it, but what is a memorable moment? It might just be drinking a glass of wine and pairing it with flipping amazing chocolate at a wine farm that you've never been to before, having a great conversation, it can be very simple, it does not have to be fancy. It's moving away from the bland dull, I have another conference with a white tablecloth, sitting there in the chair and I am going to hear a speaker, have a buffet, which has got dry food, and I leave.

Andrew 20:36

I have no idea what you are on about (laughter) and all you're doing is thinking, well, let's just wait until the bar opens in one and a half hours, sitting through suffering this thing.

Maria, this is fantastic and what we'll do, obviously, is bring you back if you don't mind in a couple of months. We will be in a different stage in the life of COVID. Hopefully, the sun will be bright and everybody's optimism will also match that as well.

What I would also say is good luck, every success with this venture, every success with the family, the move and everything. I look forward to speaking to you in a couple of months time.

Maria 21:28

Well, thank you so much. We think it's a fantastic group and the platform is amazing. Thank you for the opportunity.