

Lawson Laughs It Up

Lawson Software Inc. sets itself apart from the competition with a comically branded event strategy that increases customer involvement, shatters attendance records, and more than doubles event-related media mentions.

By Sarah Boehle



ILLUSTRATIONS: COURTESY OF LAWSON SOFTWARE INC.

Thousands gather in a San Diego auditorium on a March day for CUE, Lawson Software Inc.'s annual Conference and User Exchange. Lawson president and CEO Harry Debes enters stage left, dressed in a suit and running shoes. As he walks onto a set that replicates The Ed Sullivan Theatre, where David Letterman performs his nightly shtick, the band — led by a Lawson executive standing in for Paul Shaffer — breaks into the iconic “Late Show” theme music.

First, Debes warms up the crowd with an opening monologue. Punch lines are punctuated by the band's percussionist, who never hesitates to offer an enthusiastic rim shot or tongue-in-cheek thumping of the bass drum — especially when the jokes are intentionally cheesy: “It’s great to be here. Boy, isn’t San Diego beautiful? And the weather is always perfect. But, sometimes, they get a morning fog — which fortunately doesn’t last very long. And you know what happens when the fog lifts? UCLA.”

BUH-DUM-BUM. Then, Debes ticks through a Letterman-esque Top 10 List (“Top Ten Ways Lawson Got Stronger since Last Year’s CUE”), and begins to introduce his six celebrity “guests,” which include three high-profile customers and three Lawson employees. Occasionally, he interrupts his steady stream of jokes by chucking a pencil or other object over his shoulder, triggering Letterman’s well-known glass-shattering sound effects.

“We’ll be right back after these words from our sponsor!” Debes intermittently exclaims, before cutting to a commercial break. On a jumbo screen behind his desk, the popular Mac versus PC ad campaign is spoofed repeatedly, with various riffs pitting

EVENT AT A GLANCE

Objective: Increase event attendance, and differentiate Lawson from the competition by highlighting the company’s ability to deliver an exemplary customer experience.

Strategy: Create a distinct event brand that represents Lawson as a company that is committed to developing innovative software and to ensuring that the customer experience is enjoyable, rewarding, and fun.

Tactics: Use humor, creativity, and spontaneity as a means to convey serious business information.

Results: Attendance increased more than 20 percent between 2006 and 2008; event-related media mentions more than doubled between 2007 and 2008; and 89 percent of CUE 2008 attendees said that they would attend CUE again, compared to 82 percent in 2006.

Lawson against some of the enterprise-resource-planning (ERP) software industry’s biggest players. One of these commercials pokes fun at software users afraid to move into the future with Lawson’s competitors — the “PC Guy” — protesting: “Hey, hey, no, no. Tell the future, time to go!” Another one contrasts Lawson’s vibrant online community of more than 5,000 users against the competition’s community — which consists of only two people.

As soon as Debes wraps up, Lawson senior vice president of product management Dean Hager takes the stage. After playing a home video featuring his recent skydiving adventures, Hager demos various Lawson products for the crowd, then walks to the top of a steep flight of stairs, lifts his arms, and jumps. The audience gasps, then exhales a collective sigh of relief, as

Hager, suspended by an intricate wiring system, makes a soaring, high-wire exit from the stage.



A BRAND IS BORN

Antics such as these are a mainstay at CUE, marking a distinct departure from the user-group norm in Lawson’s world. And that’s exactly the point. Lawson, a global ERP software company headquartered in St. Paul, MN, may well deliver serious, business-critical software solutions, but it didn’t want the market to see it as just another stodgy or uber-conservative technology company.

For many years, Lawson has differentiated itself from the competition by focusing on the innovative nature of its software solutions and its strong vertical focus on sectors such as health care, manufacturing, and financial services. All good, but not exactly the stuff of stodgy-busting legend.

Then — like Leno bringing a bit of edge to the safe confines of Carson’s Tonight Show — came Debes, who joined Lawson in 2005, followed by new marketing senior vice president Travis White. From day one, according to Lawson vice president of corporate communications Terrence Blake, White made it clear that he wanted Lawson to be different. “He wanted to use humor, and he endorsed taking more creative risks,” Blake says.

Such differentiation is especially important in Lawson’s industry, notes Blake. “We have strong software, strong products, and a strong history, but we go up against two giants in our industry: SAP and Oracle. People won’t lose their jobs for choosing Oracle or SAP, but if they choose

MEET LARS LAWSON

Introduced in 2007, the animated Lars Lawson character made his debut at CUE and appears in several online Webisodes that are launched at the event each year. To view the entire collection of Lars Lawson videos, visit www.EventWebLinks.com.



Rescue the Cat

Emphasizing the company's "simpler is better" philosophy, Lars Lawson uses a fish to lure a cat from a tree.



Merry Catmas

Lawson made a charitable donation to World Vision based on the number of views this Christmas clip generated.



Well Done

Lars Lawson once again saves the day — and triumphs over thinly veiled Lawson competitors in the process.

Lawson, they are staking their reputation on why they went with a smaller company. So we have to be different. We have to give our customers a valid reason for choosing Lawson."

With Debes and White at the helm to craft the message, that reason would now include working with a company that not only offers customers a consistently superior experience, but also is willing to engage the marketplace in fun, irreverent ways.

Now the company just needed to bring the concept to life — to prove that its commitment to humor and spontaneity wasn't just a marketing campaign, but a central way of life. In CUE, it had the perfect platform.

CUE had, for more than 25 years, existed as a typical user-group event, full of the expected technical and customer-support content. But in 2001, Lawson shifted responsibility for CUE from its support team to the marketing department and expanded the event's audience to include not only users, but also Wall Street and industry analysts, partners, and the media. "The intent was to turn CUE into the focal point for everything that we do throughout the year," Blake says. "So we transformed it into our annual platform to stake out a place in the industry and make a grand statement to our customers and stakeholders."

Starting with the 2006 event, Debes and White's vision would now be a driving force behind CUE as well. They wanted the Lawson event team to craft "a more unique, experiential event that got the attendees talking about the brand in a more personal way," Blake says. It was welcome news. "With a CEO who loved to have fun onstage and a marketing senior VP who opened



To create a more personal connection with its customers, Lawson Software Inc. made a conscious decision to incorporate humor into its annual user conference. Spearheading the effort was Lawson president and CEO, Harry Debes.

up the creative opportunities, new possibilities emerged," Blake says. "If you have executives who are willing to have fun and trust the creative talent of their event teams, great things are possible."

To determine just what those great things would be, Lawson turned to its long-time event partner, Minnetonka, MN-based Triad. The goal: to blend Debes' and White's passion for humor as a differentiator with CUE's operational history to craft an entirely new event brand — one that would not only bring some needed zing to a mature user-group event, but that would play a major role in the new positioning of Lawson as the place for corporate clients who believed that all work and no play is a decidedly dull way to run a business. "We wanted to make the brand come to life, and get customers talking about it long after the event concluded," says Amy Garner, director of strategic accounts at Triad.



"Our goal is to not be boring," Blake adds. "The world is full of boring corporate events with a bunch of well-groomed, fully scripted, over-coached speakers talking

down to an audience. Or in technology, it's Silicon Valley prima donnas trying to 'out-cool' one another. We're doing something different."

FUNNY BUSINESS

In 2006, Lawson took its first steps toward implementing humor as an event-branding strategy when it began to incorporate obvious comedic elements into the event for the first time. It started with a "Crazy Eddy" video that featured a frantic Crazy Eddy-style character (think late-night TV dude hawking an electronics blowout) selling everything from Ginsu knives and a Slackberry Taser device to enterprise software from a Lawson rival. According to Blake, the video's punch line, "It's free. All you got to do is sign on for some maint'nance," was a joke only tech people could appreciate and, in this case, love. The "Crazy Eddy" video and another video the following day — which tracked the genesis of Lawson's major release of a new product line that year to a "eureka" moment experienced by Hager while ice fishing deep

in the night on a frozen Minnesota lake — sent a clear message to that year's attendees that things at CUE were trending toward the jiggy.

A fortuitous accident born more out of a minor crisis than carefully planned strategy also had an influence on the event brand that began to take shape when, also in 2006, one of Lawson's keynote speakers came down with food poisoning at the last minute and couldn't go on. Debes, who had delivered a dry, straightforward PowerPoint keynote presentation the previous day, stepped in to save the show. "Harry got on stage and told jokes — off the cuff, not rehearsed," says Triad CEO Jennifer Arends. "When he adlibbed, clients saw a different side of Harry and a different side of Lawson — one that doesn't take life so seriously, but that takes its clients, its products, and its service super seriously."

Debes' Late Show shtick and Hager's high-flyer routine had a repeat performance at the 2007 event, which also saw the debut of mascot Lars Lawson.

The animated character burst onto the scene in the first of a series of Webisodes that pits Lars, a proponent of Lawson's "simpler is better" ethos, against two thinly veiled Lawson competitors in an attempt to rescue a cat from a tree. Lars, of course, saves the cat — and the day — in each video with a smart, human-scaled solution.



GOOD COMEDIC TIMING

By the time CUE 2008 rolled around, it was clear the fun-for-all strategy had struck the right nerve. Customers were visibly embracing the new brand, and some were even arriving at the event with tricks of their own up their sleeves to share with fellow attendees and Lawson representatives. "Some of the best comedic moments last year were completely unscripted and driven by customers," Blake says.

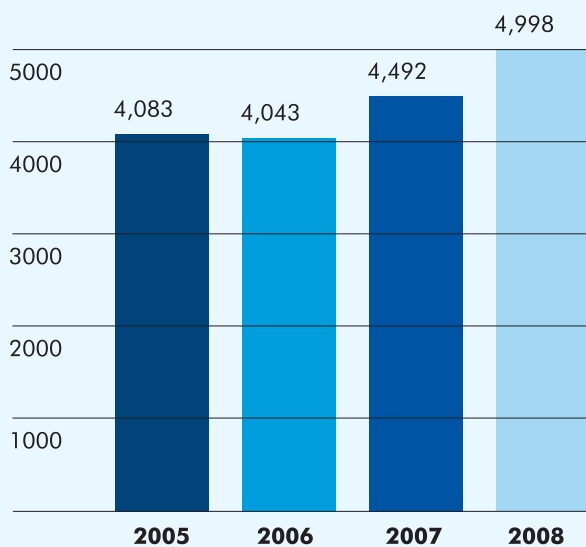
During one such moment, Ryan Schader, vice president of business development at Jelly Belly Candy Co. in Fairfield, CA, was being interviewed by Debes on a set designed to replicate the "Dean Martin Variety Hour," a popular 1960s-era television show. At one point during the interview, Schader casually asked whether Debes would like to taste some of his company's latest, most popular flavors. Debes readily obliged.

There was a catch, however. Unbeknownst to Debes, in one glass were classic Jelly Belly beans, and in the other glass were Jelly Belly's infamous Harry Potter-inspired Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. "They both looked the same, but vomit, booger, earwax, and dirt taste vastly different than licorice and popcorn," Arends says. Debes, of course, nodded in approval and smiled as he picked the good flavors,



LAUGHING STOCK

After stalling at around 4,000 attendees, CUE's humorous approach is winning fans — and rebuilding attendance.



and the audience howled with laughter each time he chose a stomach-churning flavor from the wrong glass of beans.

“Harry’s face was priceless as he tasted these jelly beans and tried not to show how awful they tasted,” Arends says.

CAREFULLY CALIBRATED COMEDY

With all the fun at CUE, does Lawson worry that its use of humor might dilute the more serious messaging the user group is meant to convey? “When we plan the event, we’re always mindful of our primary purpose,” Blake says. “We need to convey serious business information, and we need to make product announcements, talk about

Lawson is also careful to ensure that any humorous elements incorporated into the annual event serve a larger marketing-focused purpose. Hager’s leap at CUE 2007, for example, was meant to emphasize the underlying message of his keynote presentation: “You have to have faith, take a leap, and believe in the experts.” And when Hager’s CUE 2008 presentation was introduced by a humorous video parodying the original British version of the popular TV show “The Office,” the primary objective was to emphasize Lawson’s three E’s: Efficiency, Effectiveness, and tEam.

the keynote away?” Freund says. “And, yes, we had mixed reactions. By their virtue, all creative elements can be a challenge, but they also offer the largest opportunity for message success. I would say, in general, that the larger gambles we have taken in this arena have been successful, and we will continue to push the limits moving forward for events to come.”

A WELCOME CHANGE

So what do attendees think? While the majority of conference-goers have welcomed the new CUE “brand” with open arms, there are some who are less than enthusiastic about the change in tone. (“I don’t need the gimmicks ...” as one CUE 2007 attendee and blogger put it. “Just tell me, honestly, what have you done for me lately that *really* helps me run my business.”)

Naysayers aside, one thing is for certain: CUE attendance has soared by more than 20 percent since the new brand was introduced, with the event attracting 4,998 attendees in 2008 compared to only 4,048 in 2006. Customer involvement in the event has risen dramatically, too, thanks to Lawson’s now-standard practice of interviewing high-profile customers during Debes’ opening session. “It used to take a bit of legwork to line up customers who were willing to appear at the event and share their success stories,” Blake says. “But now, people are vying for spots and lining up early for a chance to share their stories on the main stage. It’s becoming an honor to appear.”

The humor and creativity on display at CUE, Blake says, not only reinforce Lawson’s vertical expertise



Lawson Software Inc.’s lighthearted approach to its annual Conference and User Exchange pairs company information and education with entertainment, such as the performance pictured here featuring a trio of Rat Pack impersonators.

recent innovations, and share customer experiences and success stories. Most important, we need to provide educational content that helps our customers to get the most out of our software. When we introduce humor, we’re still doing all of that, but we are simply changing the way that we deliver the information. Instead of having a guy in a suit read a teleprompter, we’re finding ways to relay the same information in a much more fun and creative way.”

While the audience loved “The Office” spoof and other humorous elements typically on display at CUE, Blake and Frank Freund, Triad’s vice president of production and creative services, acknowledge that creating an event brand with a comedic slant involves some risk. “Some of our biggest fears when we launched the David Letterman format in 2007 were, ‘Will they get it? Will they think it’s funny? Will they hate us for taking



and innovative approach to developing software, the CUE attitude also signals a customer experience that is different than what the competition offers. “On the rational side, you get all the stuff you need: products, features, and innovations. On the emotional side, you also get everything you want: access to Lawson’s executive management team, a more transparent company where every customer counts, and the chance to work with people who can make you laugh. Essentially, what the CUE brand communicates is the fact that we’re a company that’s willing to be innovative and creative not only with our products, but in how we present our event and interact with our customers.”

Furthermore, Blake says that Lawson’s event branding strategy is helping the company to redefine the nature of customer-vendor relationships in its industry. “Software is complex. You have to install it, maintain it, and support it, and a relationship goes on for about 10 years. This event helps us to connect with customers and accentuate the good things about our industry. We’re saying, ‘OK, if we’re in this for 10 years, let’s be in it together and make it a fun, enjoyable experience.’”

Three years into CUE’s transformation, Blake says that Lawson customers are clearly beginning to respond to that message. “They are saying, ‘Yes, we see evidence that you’re connecting with us in ways you haven’t in the past.’ From the moment we began pursuing this event strategy, that’s the message we aimed to communicate.” **E**

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HUMOR: THE RISKS AND REWARDS

As any humorist knows, eliciting laughter is a lot of hard work. But humor can be an invaluable marketing tool, according to Susan Friedmann, CSP, author of “Riches in Niches: How to Make It Big in a Small Market,” and “Meeting & Event Planning for Dummies.” Here, Friedmann explains some of the risks and rewards associated with incorporating humor as part of an event-marketing strategy:

THE RISKS

Failure to integrate. It is crucial to remember that your event campaign should be fully integrated into your company’s marketing plan as a whole. If you are using humor as a tactic in your television and print media, for example, bring it to the live event, too — and vice versa. At Lawson, the event drives the humor through various other channels. For example, the company loads its Lars Lawson videos (which debut at CUE each year and present Lawson’s approach to problem solving relative to that of its primary — and thinly veiled — competitors) to YouTube to create viral messaging opportunities with content that originated at CUE.

Failure to repeat. Remember, consumers need to hear a message at least six times before they’ll recall it easily. Using humor at your meeting or event one year, and then going back to dry PowerPoint presentations the next year will only send mixed messages and confuse your audience. If you’re going to incorporate humor into your event, stick with it — and give it time to stick.

THE REWARDS

Create a lasting impression.

One of the major objectives of any customer event is to create a lasting and positive impression in attendees’ minds, and humor can be a powerful tool for doing so. Just think: People will go out of their way to remember a great joke, whereas they’ll never, ever stop to jot down the details of an eye-catching graphic.

Draw a crowd. Lawson’s strategy of using humor as a tactic to serve both its corporate and event objectives allows it to underscore the company’s brand values and strengthen the more serious content of CUE main-stage presentations. This strategy is also a terrific way to engage an event crowd and build the kind of “buzz” and word of mouth that is sure to point even more people toward your company and your message.

Differentiate yourself. By using humor to contrast exaggerated examples of industry “norms” with how your company excels, you can differentiate yourself from the competition and clearly position your products and services in the public eye. Lawson’s spoofs on the PC versus Mac commercials and its Lars Lawson series, for example, which pit the expertise and professionalism of Lawson personnel against bumbling, overcomplicating fools who represent competing products, always elicit a chuckle. And you’d better believe that the next time a customer is searching for an enterprise-resource-planning provider, images of those commercials are apt to flash through his or her mind.