



it to a stylus pen.” For “Eat,” the team scrapped the original idea for a chocolate bar (which they feared could melt) for an Italian Garden Herb Kit that hinted at fine dining. And finally, for “Sleep,” the team settled on a mask that become so popular, says Rathgeber, “We actually ended up ordering more of them because we thought they’d be a nice touch to leave in the rooms of our VIPs.”

Each promotional item is sent two weeks apart (along with an insert with more info) in order to have more contact points with the planner. Because the ticket price of each piece is quite high (about three times the normal budget), UNL Conference Services also narrowed down a list of recipients to include only the planners that the department has had substantive contact with and that they believe will be solid prospects.

“We see this campaign as helping us close a deal by providing tangible, high-quality examples of our services that could help address some common hesitations planners might have about a new venue,” says Rathgeber, who also hopes to continue the campaign into the near future. “Since it isn’t intended

to reach a large number of people, I hope to keep it around for a few years.”

UniqueVenues.com/UnivNebraska
(402) 472.5063

RUNNERS UP: For marketing collateral—Boston University (Boston, MA, UniqueVenues.com/BostonUniv), Miami University Conference and Event Services (Oxford, OH, UniqueVenues.com/MUOhio); For print ad—Boston University (Boston, MA, UniqueVenues.com/BostonUniv), University of Delaware (Newark, DE, UniqueVenues.com/UnivDelawareNewark)

BEST WEBSITE

winner:
McNamara Alumni Center at the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis, MN)

One of the great things about the Internet is it can connect people from all over the world in a single place. McNamara Alumni Center at the University of Minnesota took that idea

to heart and designed its official website (mac-events.org) with touches of their surroundings to make users feel at home when browsing.

“Our venue is architecturally unique and stunning with rich wood décor, dark copper colors, lots of natural light, and water features. We are very intentional about conveying that beauty and elegance on the website, taking cues from the building’s architectural features to develop design elements and a color palette that is carried throughout,” says Amy T. Leyden, director of marketing and sales. “We want planners to get a sense of what the space feels like before they’ve ever been in it.”

McNamara Alumni Center’s site was most recently redesigned in late 2014, focusing on importing larger photos (and less text) and more seamless navigation. On the homepage, three distinct sections are laid out—impress (for social events), marry (for the wedding market), and meet (for conferences and business functions)—clicking on one of the options funnels prospects to the appropriate section. The user will also find a whole host of relevant information, including sample floor plans and menus, photographs, recommended vendor partners, an FAQ section, availability calendar that pulls directly from the campus’ booking software, package pricing, and virtual tours.

“We created our website with clients’



BEST OF UNIQUE VENUES

questions in mind, and provided all the information they would need to help them make their decision,” says Leyden, which in turn also helps provide more qualified leads for the more than 850 meetings and events that are held annually at the McNamara Alumni Center. “With that many booked events, we get a lot of inquiries. But now, many questions can be answered on the website, which means sales calls are filtered.”

And the venue is not stopping there. “We will soon be adding video,” says Leyden, and Google Street View. “The footage they shot was excellent and the virtual tours are linked to our meeting rooms.”

UniqueVenues.com/mcnamara // (612) 625.8876

RUNNERS UP: Harbor Tower Events at Legg Mason Tower (Baltimore, MD, UniqueVenues.com/HarborTowerEvents), Spirit Fire Retreat Center (Leyden, MA, UniqueVenues.com/SpiritFire)



BEST SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

winner:

*(TIE) Frost Valley YMCA
(Claryville, NY) & NOAH's Event
Venue (South Jordan, UT)*

Social media is here to stay, but in such a crowded marketplace, it's the venues that develop the most unique strategies that end up becoming the leaders in gathering followers. “We use the 80/20 rule,” says Amanda Hinski, director of marketing and communications at Frost Valley YMCA, one of two winners in this category recognized for their Facebook profile. “We provide 80 percent of our content with the goal of audience engagement, while 20 percent of our content is self-promotional,” she explains.

If you do the math, that means the venue relies most on sharing curated features and infographics from sites like Soul Pancake, Kid President, and WHYY, “as well as local news stories that reflect our core values,” says Hinski. “We feel this keeps us top-of-mind for our audience when they see that we're sharing the kinds of things they want to see each and every day.” It's also pragmatic since Facebook doesn't give

as much reach to promotional content as it does to actual storytelling. “When people like, share, or comment on this content, that shows Facebook it belongs in people's newsfeeds.”

These ideals have allowed Frost Valley YMCA to grow to more than 30,000 followers in just the last couple of years. The communications team posts several times a day, including a “Photo of the Day” in the morning, featured reading material in the afternoon, and less frequent evening posts that are boosted to push for event registration. In the future, the venue also helps to create more of its own story-based posts. “This may be more time intensive, but we have inspirational stories happening here every day,”

At NOAH's Event Venue, recognized in this category for their Twitter presence, the idea is to continually tweet and retweet every day, all day—and also share the wealth of posts across all platforms, says Kendalyn Hartsock, the venue's director of social media. “Anything we post to Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and our blog is also shared on Twitter.” Specifically, the event venue conglomerate (with 37 locations in 25 states) has been using Twitter since late

2014 as part of their overall communications strategy. “We are building a brand, not just a following,” says Hartsock.

Her team has come up with five parameters that guide all of their posts. First and foremost, to always include photos and videos. “If your posts don't have visuals, viewers probably won't even see it,” she says. It's also imperative to have unique content every time and always share links to the main blog site. Being consistent is also key to make followers look forward to your posts. And giveaways always help.

In 2017, NOAH's Event Venue will look to expand their reach: “Snapchat is becoming a dominant platform,” says Hartsock. “Our viewers are using it, and we want to be where they are.”

*UniqueVenues.com/FrostValleyYMCA
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RUNNER UP: Morris Inn, University of Notre Dame (Notre Dame, IN, UniqueVenues.com/notredameconfcenter)