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Event Savy: Convention Critique

How well did the national conventions do? We checked with event pros around the country to find out

by **Rachel Globus** | Published in **October 2008** | [national conventions](#) | [Departments](#)

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The Republicans

The design was very simple, very clean, and I think that's part of their message: 'We don't need glitz, we don't need glamour. We're a unified party, we believe in this one direction.' I think they achieved that with that one giant screen. — *Johnson*

While [the candidates] were talking, they both just had the backdrop. When they were talking about specifics, having stats or media playing on those screens would have just kind of hammered in their points. They could have leveraged that canvas more successfully by making it a blackboard for them that would have benefited the people viewing at home and the people who were there. — *VanRosendale*

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The RNC stage was designed to connect to the audience in a simple, yet effective way.

Courtesy: Republican National Convention

They had that big video backdrop behind the stage, and I bet in the arena, it had some effectiveness, but with the larger crowd actually being on the other end of the camera, I thought the content behind it actually made him look old. ... I felt like they had a lot of visual space left unused. The color choices that they had behind Sen. McCain were poor. From the camera's eyes, at times you had white behind him and with his white hair, you lost all your depth of field.



Steve Johnson, Senior Vice President, Creative Services, Cramer, Norwood, Mass.

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What's top on your mind for 2009?

- Becoming a networking expert.
- Driving sales and/or improving profitability.
- Improving work-life balance.
- Going 2.0 with my marketing (social networking and other new media).
- Improving service to clients/client relationships.

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I felt like Sen. McCain's camp was a little bit forced in their use of technology. In my opinion, if you get to that point where you're forcing it, you're almost better off not using it, because people can tell. — *Walker*



Lisa VanRosendale, Senior Vice President, Immersa Marketing, San Francisco

The wide shots were fantastic. But when McCain spoke, he was in a real blown-out blue background, and I thought the Democrats really had addressed the foreground shots and the tight shots really well.

When Giuliani spoke, they showed a skyline shot of New York. It was a gorgeous video wall, but [those watching on TV] couldn't tell what the images were until they did a wide shot of the images. — *St. Onge*

Q & A: RNC Exec. Producer David J. Nash

A lifelong Republican, Nash helmed his fifth RNC this year. Here's his take on all the action at St. Paul, Minn.'s Xcel Energy Center.



Mike Walker, Producer and Production Manager, Mike Walker Creative, The Colony, Texas

keeping the design simple: "We felt that we didn't want anything too elaborate. In view of the economy and everything else, to have something elaborate and spend millions of dollars extra just seemed inappropriate."

that background: "What went on the screen, of course, was created by the campaign. ... The basic idea was something that was visual, that would keep people's attention, but not detract from the people who were speaking. Unfortunately, some of what they selected, they didn't understand that we wanted something very neutral behind the speaker."

pared-down technology: "We just felt it was inappropriate to try to do more. So many times it's done just for the sake of saying you used it. It's kind of like a concert that has a lot of lasers and smoke and so forth. Sometimes it covers the fact that it's just a weak performer."



Todd St. Onge, Project Manager, Production Design Associates, North

The Democrats

Charleston, S.C.

I thought that was a clever bit of staging with such a young candidate. When you saw the camera shot of [Sen.] Obama, you saw him as if he were at the White House. They've already placed him there in the minds of everybody who's watching the broadcast — it's easy to see him being the leader of the free world.

You look at the Democrats and they seem to embrace technology. ... I think they were very much saying, 'Hey, this is a culture of technology. We're comfortable with it, and we're going to use it to our advantage.' — *Johnson*

If you look at the way that they're marketing these campaigns, it's totally different than four years ago. The viral community has led and paved the way, and that is an interesting dynamic that we need to pay attention to. That is how the set design for Obama failed miserably in integrating his viral campaign into his set design. He's all about change, he's all about responsibility, and yet he picked a very opulent and overstated set design that I think took away from the integrity of what he was saying. — *VanRosendale*

Obama had a unique opportunity to really speak to the country and he did, but I didn't think he used the cameras very well. He kept looking to his right and to his left.

Obama's whole thing is about connecting with the people, and [with the set design] it felt like he connected with the people. — *Walker*

It was a very massive, very striking set. Was it environmental? I doubt it. But it looked good.

It's very important to get all the signs and the flag waving, and I think they knocked that out. ... Somebody took the time just from a production standpoint to light every level of that stadium. It's all for the camera, but that's effective marketing to show that there's a lot of people behind this candidate.

I was really impressed with the Democrats' setup and I thought it really catered to the camera a lot. ... It looked really good on TV. — *St. Onge*

Q & A: DNC Exec. Producer Ricky Kirshner

Kirshner managed hundreds of staffers and thousands of volunteers as one of two executive producers of the 2008 DNC. We caught up with the four-time DNC executive producer to find out all about it.

strategy behind the set design: "It was meant to convey 'strength' and 'foundation' and 'solid building,' among other things. We looked at a lot of federal buildings in Washington. ... We were clear with the campaign that this wasn't a rally, but this was something bigger and more important and shouldn't look like every other rally he did."

media hullabaloo: "A lot of people sort of reviewed our set during the load-in and started saying not nice things about our set before we ever did our show. How many people get reviewed during a load-in?"

role of technology: "With the LED screens, even though we were shooting in 16 by 9, we made a conscious decision to make the screens a portrait as opposed to landscape aspect ratio. We felt that most of the shots as we got to the speech were going to be IMAG and would play better in that aspect ratio. ... The thought of the whole thing was always to make his speech the most important thing."

designing for the audience at home: "It was really hard. We don't [have control over the video feed] — we're at the mercy of however the media covers us. Whereas we can control some things in a real live TV setting, here we're pretty much exposed to 270 [degrees]. ... That's always an issue when you're the doing the convention."



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