

## **Insights and Inspiration from the World of NASCAR**

*When unsung heroes shine* By Rhea Blanken

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Who operates amusement parks for kids and fantasy camps for adults? Who offers shopping and dining opportunities, is an association - and is also one of the the fastest growing sports in America? NASCAR - that's the National Association for Stock Car Racing. With an ever-increasing wildly enthusiastic fan base and loyal sponsors investing millions to have their company's logo cover a racecar's exterior, interior, driver's racing suit, helmet and everywhere else applicable - no one can deny NASCAR is flourishing.

Whether it's the Daytona 500, Brickyard 400 or any other in the 36 race NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series, it takes hundreds of people before and during the race to guarantee an enjoyable experience for all those fans. From the owner (who secures sponsorships) to the team manager (overseeing all manner of equipment and personnel details) to the crew chief (who manages every aspect of the "anything but" stock cars) to numerous engineers and mechanics - all work as one to provide the best possible car for their driver.

### **Never just the driver**

On race day, these people are in the background, dedicating energy and expertise, hoping their driver will be the one taking the final victory lap. From the larger team comes a special group commitment - that of the pit crew. Who they are and how they work together (for *that* day's championship) is what makes everything possible. It's never the just the driver or the car.

The pit crew, who service all aspects of the car before and during a race, is made up of a maximum of seven men. They watch and wait, ready to go when their car comes onto pit alley. Like a ballet without the music, the pit crew lugs four 75-pound tires and two 90-pound fuel cans "over the wall" to service their car in mere seconds - "14" is considered good. During that time, a car will be refueled, have four tires changed, and have its grille and windshield cleaned. After 14 seconds, a car begins to fall behind – so the faster a car is safely out of pit road, the better its chance to maintain track position.

Since it's easier to gain time in the pits than on the track, seconds here can win (or lose) a race.

The men who make up the pit crew are selected for their hand-eye coordination, agility, strength, performance under pressure, fast reaction time, and ability to remain focused. These days, the ideal pit candidate has a master's in engineering and played football – someone strong who knows how to work on a team, can perform complex choreographed actions and above all is intelligent. Most of these men are unknown to the general racing public, nor do they get a victory lap. However, when a driver does reach Victory Lane, his first thanks are most often to the pit crew, knowing full well his skills behind the wheel are only one part of that day's winning strategy.

### **Team - Success**

In comparing critical contributions a pit crew makes to ensure a driver arrives safely to Victory Lane, Barbara S. Friedman, finance and administration sr. VP, Assn of American Medical Colleges, relates the same attitudes and expertise of her organization's many "unsung heroes" in the creation and execution of their annual meeting.

AAMC's team is wide and varied – from the mail room staff (getting materials on site) to the registration staff (securing a seamless experience of belonging) to the audio-visual staff (making sure technology cooperates) down to the staff making sure the right handouts are in the correct breakout meeting room – all in concert with the hotel facilitations management having the room set to specifications in concert with the hotel staff having all the breaks beautifully set and ready to go on time.

In many cases, back office support also makes the conference success possible, producing increased member satisfaction and expanded influence to fulfill the mission. It's the on-site staff that works long hours in the background and those back at headquarters who have contributed their part that are mostly unseen. Because when they do their jobs well, it is transparent – they are the "unsung heroes" of the meeting's success.

## Consider

Who makes up your organization's pit crew? What skills and abilities are you looking to add to their ranks? Where are you looking to secure more pit crew staff? What appreciation and recognition does your organization provide after a race well run? What positive feedback is available yearlong?

"To win a championship, you've got to do it throughout the whole year." □ - Jeff Gordon, champion racecar driver

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