

Poor Conference Attendance

by

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One activity that is common to most associations, large or small, is an annual conference or convention. This event usually includes a mixture of educational sessions, business meetings and social functions. In addition to its fundamental purpose of allowing the 'association' of members, an annual meeting can also become the major source of non-subscription revenue each year. An association which allows the following conditions to exist is missing a golden opportunity to both increase conference attendance *and* improve its overall financial condition.

No budget

The lack of a realistic budget, prepared by the annual meeting committee and approved by the governing board, is an open invitation to a financial disaster. A budget forces the committee members and the association's directors to *think* and *plan*. Financial estimates for promotion, hotel or venue meeting rooms, food functions, invited speakers, audio-visual needs, and other cost centers provide the necessary discipline for projecting the attendance and registration fees required. Organizations that do not develop an overall financial plan for the meeting *always* underprice registration fees and underestimate expenses.

One element common to conferences that are not financially successful is that the association's leadership did not price the registration properly. This is usually due to a fear that if the registration fee is 'on the high side', attendance will suffer. Unless it is totally unreasonable, the size of the registration fee is never the real reason members do not attend a conference. Rather, they simply are not convinced that the program is worth the cost!

Another golden rule is budgeting in that *every* association conference must generate a surplus. This major infusion of cash can carry an emerging association forward into the next year. Without a budgeted surplus, the inevitable meeting losses will eat into minimal reserves (if they exist) and will create havoc with the association's cash flow. This in turn will limit the association's ability to service its members, which eventually will cause a decline in membership. Thus, a budgeted surplus from an annual conference is an essential aspect of good association management.

Stale program

Research in the US has shown that the major stimulus to attendance is the quality of the educational program and what can be learned by attending. Members and non-members will travel significant distances and will pay reasonable fees if the program is recognized as an *investment* in their professional or personal development.

However, for many business and trade associations the annual convention is seen principally as an opportunity for social interaction, with the quality of the program a secondary consideration. Similarly, many scientific and professional societies ignore the potential for informal or

unstructured education, and tend to overschedule formal presentations. The phenomenal growth of 'poster' sessions at scientific meetings demonstrates that more informal methods of presenting complex information can be readily accepted.

The program content of the meeting must be on the cutting edge of the discipline. While scientific meetings can usually retain the same format for a number of years, since the main stimulus for attending is to learn about the latest research or clinical findings, featuring the 'same old crowd' of speakers each year will eventually drive away bright newcomers, who will move on to develop their own meetings.

And an annual meeting of a trade association will attract a larger attendance if keynote speakers who can 'draw' are engaged. However, a balance must be established between paying for a 'name' and the quality of the rest of the program. A well-known authority or exciting plenary speaker can be an attraction at a food function. And recognize that breakfasts are fast becoming more attractive than heavy lunches or boring 'banquets.'

Small break-out sessions and workshops providing an opportunity for personal expression and 'hands-on' experience are also sure-fire attendance boosters for all associations. No one likes to listen to other people talk all the time. Also, carefully planned social events provide ideal opportunities for informal 'networking'. Meeting others who are willing to share ideas to improve a member's business or hobby often will be remembered as a valuable part of a meeting. So allow plenty of unstructured time between formal sessions.

Unattractive venue

In a number of small and financially weak associations an attitude exists that holding the annual convention or conference in an attractive venue is almost immoral. Uninspiring cities and second-rate hotels are selected, usually with inadequate meeting space and with limited amenities for after-hour activities. In fact, the whole idea of enjoying a conference is often looked upon as frivolous and not worthy of the lofty goals of the association. After all, planners of boring meetings reason, avoiding attractive locations keeps attendees in the meeting rooms and reduces the cost of attending. They overlook the fact that the most expensive cost of attending a meeting is the time a person spends away from a business or practice.

For-profit companies have found that packing their sales and management people off to an attractive resort location for intensive corporate meetings pays off. If there is value in holding a business meeting in a n attractive venue, because there is a positive return on the investment, why not apply the same principle to the non-profit company (i.e., association)? Knowing what to look for when selecting a meeting property requires special knowledge and experience. An association should develop written minimal standards for selecting meeting space and guest accommodations, whatever its size. And contracting with a professional meeting planner early in the planning stages invariably will save an association money as well as protecting it from unexpected disasters. Very few volunteers have the skills necessary to negotiate a good hotel contract, assess the quality of the catering staff, and assure that other groups scheduled in the facility at the same time will not adversely affect an association's meeting.

While the location is not as important as the program content, it *can* make the difference to a member undecided about the investment of time and money, and it is very important to an accompanying guest who often reinforces the final decision to attend.

Inadequate promotion

‘Too little, too late’ sums up the marketing and promotion of most poorly managed conferences. Both characteristics invariably occur because the program committee did not set, and/or did not abide by, agreed deadlines. Along with setting the meeting dates and location at least 12 months in advance, a definite time table for program development and marketing must be established and agreed to by *everyone* involved.

Constant reference to the meeting site, dates and topics should be made in all association literature, including letters (e.g., print the conference dates and location on the letterhead!). As the program takes shape, keep members informed through the newsletter and other communication pieces. This will build expectation, so that members will be mentally prepared to receive the main promotion piece.

Direct mail to members and non-members should be done at the lowest cost and with maximum frequency, consistent with the adopted budget. The main brochure with complete program and registration information should reach members three months before the meeting. Follow-up reminders, such as specially printed postcards (which are very cost-effective to print and post), should arrive two months and, ideally, one month out. (*Note: since this was published the availability of blast emails has replaced the post cards*). Reach non-members by obtaining mailing lists in label form from other associations with similar interests, or from list brokers who will help with the selection. As with membership marketing, *always* measure the response from all lists. This will give you data for selecting commercial lists in future years.

Discount the meeting fees significantly for early registration, which will reduce the number of on-site registrations. The emphasis must be on rewarding the early birds rather than penalizing with a late fee, the member who registers one week before or on-site. The cut-off date for the discount should be one month before the event. Registrations received by this date will provide a good indicator of the final attendance (needed for accurate and therefore less costly food estimates).

No industry support

Some associations that could capitalize on industry support, either from an exhibition or educational grants, believe it is beneath their dignity. Unless there is a clear conflict of interest for either the association or its members, the financial support available from industry suppliers can often be the difference between a surplus and a loss. Even a relatively small conference of 200 scientists can usually interest 15 to 20 industry suppliers, particularly if the group is influential and/or very specialized, and the cost of setting-up an exhibition is usually minimal. The industry representatives benefit from the contacts made and the members and guests benefit from another informal educational experience.

However, make sure that the exhibition is an integral part of the conference and schedule liberal exhibition hours that do not conflict with the program. One method of gaining industry loyalty is to serve food functions in the exhibit hall, which creates more opportunities for additional industry support. With a special sign at the buffet station, a breakfast can be sponsored by a company. Even the cost of a sit-down lunch can be covered for little more than an opportunity for an industry representative to be recognized and thanked during the meal, or by table cards announcing the name of the sponsor. Another source of industry support is the sponsored

lecture; but insist on picking the speaker and the topic so that both will be consistent with the quality of the program.

Inconsistency

One characteristic of poor association management is the tendency to make changes to a well thought-out plan without allowing adequate time for success. This also applies to the annual conference. Once the issues of budget, program, location and exhibition have all been carefully developed and agreements have been reached, stick with the plan. Hold the conference at the same time, and with the same attention to program quality every year for at least four years – whatever the first year’s attendance. This will give the event time to mature, and will allow members to plan ahead and hold the dates clear. Also, better deals can be reached with the venue by guaranteeing repeat business, and industry supporters will build the event into their annual marketing budgets. Allowing individual leaders (e.g., the new program chairperson) to make arbitrary changes each year will prevent the conference from taking on a life of its own and developing a strong annual following.

Summary

1. Always develop a budget as a planning tool, to allow adequate registration fees to be established and a surplus to be expected.
2. Make sure that the program content is on the cutting edge of the discipline, and that the format allows plenty of time for unstructured education and personal interaction. Program quality is what sells the conference, and it must be worth the time and money to attend.
3. Hold the conference at an attractive, interesting venue, so that attendees, and accompanying guests, can ‘enjoy’ the experience as well as benefit from professional or personal development.
4. Promote and market the conference year round in association materials. Develop deadlines for program development and marketing, and stick to them. Make sure that the main program promotion reaches members three months before the event, with additional follow-up mailings. And give a generous discount from the usual registration fee for early birds.
5. Unless there is a conflict of interest, seek and encourage industry participation and support through an exhibition and sponsorship of food functions and special speakers.
6. Be consistent from year to year, in location, dates and identity. Attendance growth will occur steadily from year to year if a good program is presented at an attractive venue at the same time of the year. Sudden changes will derail even a well conceived plan.

A successful annual conference or convention will add vitality to an association. Members who attend will be invigorated and enthusiastic advocates for the association. The financial surplus will allow other programs to be implemented to benefit the members, creating a constantly growing organization. And the tradition of successful and useful annual conferences will impact on membership growth because this annual opportunity to ‘associate’ will become another valuable membership benefit.