

Seven Ways to Keep Your Conference Vital

Planner's Workshop

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Mary Tomlinson & John Dreyer



If you want a conference to succeed, you need to do more than throw a great party. It turns out that conference table discussion is more important than banquet table fare. Content significance has more lasting value than an expense account night on the town. Productivity has more cache than an executive suite.

Conference relevance trumped cost of airfare and lodging accommodations, security concerns, availability of support services, and accessibility to nightlife and entertainment as the number one concern in a recent survey of corporate and association meeting planners conducted by Orlando-based Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown and Russell.

Yes, relevance, that Sixties mantra. And while bell-bottoms and tie-dye T-shirts have gone the way of the Ed Sullivan Show, relevance still has resonance.

If you are a meeting planner, that is great news. Meeting and conference attendees are saying that they want more than an ordinary day out of the office.

Relevance comes from the Latin verb relevare, which means "to raise up." People who attend conferences want to be raised up, inspired, and enlightened. They are searching for secrets of success, hunting for information that will expand their professional horizons, seeking wisdom that will help them to be more efficient and productive. They are looking for programs that address what is happening in their workday lives and that offers hints and insights that will make them better at their jobs.

They want meetings to have substance that will make the next day in the office better than the last and which they feel was worth the investment of their time.

When conferences fail, it is often because they fall into the "relevance gap," the breach between their stated goals and how the planners go about achieving them.

Making meetings relevant requires a great deal of thought, and more than a little preparation. The following are seven keys to staging a relevant conference focus on detailed planning and essential follow-up.

1. Establish a goal. Before drafting the first save-the-date postcard or even thinking about drafting marketing materials, establish a clear and precise goal for the conference. The less clear and less precise the goal, the more likely it is that the session will be as relevant as that staple answer of Miss America contestants: world peace. If there is more than one stated goal, winnow them down to a total of three and make sure that they are intertwined. If you cannot establish precise goals, you should consider that your prospective attendees will not be clear on what your meeting is about.

2. Develop a theme. For starters, the theme is both the tent for your goals and the logical succession of presentations and workshops that are the map attendees follow to the goals. But the theme is also the communication technique that drives home the messages. It serves as the "tag line" and helps tie together all the experiences of the conference. The theme works to illustrate key points and serves as an aid to participants in arriving at their personal "eureka" moments. If you can get them to say "A-HA!" you will have succeeded in making the meeting relevant.

3. Draft a storyline. Give your meeting a beginning, middle, and end, and include a denouement and climax. Think about mapping the program out the way movie animators and some novelists plot—with storyboards. Consider setting your boards on easels around a room and tacking your story—your meeting—elements up to visualize the program you are developing. Develop a story arc using your speakers and events as chapters. Think in terms of how each session builds upon the next and develops the theme. A well-developed story line captures attendees' attention and engrosses them in the progression of speakers and sessions.

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4. Focus on the goals. Maintaining a laser focus on your goals during preparation will keep you on track during the meetings. Let the ideas flow but relegate those not germane to your goals to a "parking lot" board. These ideas will live to see another day and make future preparations a hundred times easier. Not setting peripheral ideas aside creates a wanton randomness that will cause your audience to define your conference as irrelevant.

5. Give attendees pre-conference assignments. Nothing is worse than being handed a thick three-ring binder at registration. It is the kind of book that is never, or seldom, read. Give the attendees work to do well before they leave home—something to think about and to get them into the mindset before the meeting. Send them reading materials and discussion questions that complement the presentations they will be attending.

6. Q&A. Be sure to schedule Q&A for each presenter and session. Attendees tend to zero in on what is relevant to them in their questions. Giving them an opportunity to have their particular issues addressed is another tool for making the meeting relevant.

7. Follow up. Gather e-mail addresses from attendees and use these to follow up over the next six months by sending out material that appears in magazines and journals that is relevant to the completed conference. You can build the cost of doing this into the registration fee. Be sure to get the necessary copyright clearances for using the material. Consider a post-conference e-mail survey of how relevant and valuable the conference was for the participants.

What worked? What didn't? How could future conferences be improved? Asking for such information communicates your commitment to making conferences relevant.

Great conferences motivate and serve as dynamics for change. They ignite creative thinking and spark fresh ideas. Attendees return to their offices energized to apply what they have learned to their work. They have a sense that they have picked up important concepts and are eager to integrate them into their careers.

When that happens, the planners have succeeded in scheduling speakers and sessions that are relevant to the needs of the attendees. And they have succeeded in raising them up.

Mary Tomlinson is president of On-Purpose Partners in Orlando, FL. (www.on-purpose.com), a strategic business consulting and communications firm. She spent 18 years as an executive with The Walt Disney Company before joining On-Purpose Partners. She specializes in business and marketing consulting; meeting, workshop and retreat facilitation; and speaking engagements. She can be reached at maryctonpurpose@aol.com.

John Dreyer is a communications consultant and writer who spent 26 years as a senior marketing and communications executive in the entertainment and travel industries. He can be reached at Dreyercommunications@earthlink.net.

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