

10 Things You Can Do To Boost Attendance at Your Next Conference

Everybody likes something for nothing, but most business people have become spoiled by attending meetings and conferences on the company's dime. Well, based on current economic conditions, some of your member's companies may have precious few dimes to spare for sending their employees to meetings, even though they will be the first to admit the value is there and that they support training and education. So, how do you encourage member companies to help their employees further their professional education, and in turn provide increased value to the company as employees? Below are 10 approaches that have found success, under a variety of economic conditions, at putting attendees in their place – at your meeting.

1) Make it Easy

All the conference marketing in the world can fall apart at the registration form if it is too complicated, too difficult to read or understand or if there are too many steps to the finale. Examine your reg form, and if it takes more than five steps to the last page that says “Congratulations, You're Registered,” it is too tough, and will likely experience a higher level of abandonment (web or paper), no matter what the price or location. Simplify, Simplify, Simplify (apologies to Thoreau).

2) Help Them Find You

Create a separate landing page for your conference, different from your website – a simple one-page info sheet with a button leading to your registration page – and optimize it for search engines to the very best of your ability. Keep it maintained, keep it fresh as speakers or events are added, and be sure to update and modify the tags to really zero in on the typical searcher – your ISP reports should show you where the visitors are coming from and even some information about location, dwell time and other indicators of audience origin. Read those report, and use them to guide your optimization. If you do not have that expertise in-house, countless SEO firms would be happy to help you for a reasonable fee. Use that landing page address on anything not nailed down that goes out of your office – fax covers, e-mail signatures for all staff, all collateral, book and purchase receipts, dues invoices, outer envelopes, everything. Drive traffic there, and the registrations will follow.

3) Help Them Get There

In an era of rising energy and transportation costs, getting to the meeting and staying there are the two largest expenditures for all but the most local attendees. If you can find some way to offset some of those costs that works for nearly everyone, take full advantage of it and promote it heavily. Car rental companies, hotels, airlines, Amtrak, all offer some sort of discount package, and many can be persuaded to start such a program for you if the volume is sufficient to warrant it. If you add up 10% off the car rental, 15% off the hotel room (above the normal block discount), free hotel shuttle to the convention site, possibly a free meal coupon at the convention, and 10-15% off airfare from select cities with a single carrier, that adds up to significant savings. Once these arrangements are in place, promote them heavily, showing how much you've saved your attendees over doing things on their own – you've got to beat the travel aggregators at their own game, and that required a certain level of creativity and the ability to go the extra mile for your members.

4) Keep It Close To Home

Do your homework, and some analysis on your attendance patterns, especially when selecting location. Pull the last four year's worth of attendance reports, and gang them sorted by city. Clear attendance patterns related to city of origin should emerge, and you can safely let those patterns guide your destination city selection for several years in advance. If 60% of your members come from the East Coast, and the balance are sprinkled in the Midwest near the Mississippi river, don't schedule your next convention in San Francisco – everyone has to travel to that one, and their costs will shoot up as a result, giving you lower attendance. As a rule of thumb, to avoid location drop-off, no more than 10% of your attendees should have to travel more than 500 miles. Unless you are limited by available venues of a certain size, there should be a suitable location that fits those parameters for the great majority of organizations.

5) Bring the Family

One of the most popular strategies for families who are looking to cut costs is to combine business travel with family vacations, effectively cutting the overall vacation cost by the amount subsidized by the company to send the employee to the meeting. If you facilitate this natural tendency, you will boost your attendance. Make it easy for them by including family activities during meeting hours, offering group discounts for activities, and offering spouse activities including lectures, trips and outings specifically for spouses. Work with your destination cities to arrange for special branded days at local attractions, discount offers for attendee's families, family oriented hotel amenities and the like to encourage bringing the family along. If you offer something of value, they will come.

6) Make It Fun

You know you have great content, and that your meeting is a valuable source of interaction, networking and industry solidarity-building, but all work and no play makes Jack and Jill dull folks. While some groups go overboard by centering the meeting around the golf outing, be sure to find a good balance in your program agenda between educational activities and team-building, lighter and more fun activities. Carefully placed on the seminar agenda, they won't hurt your session attendance, and will increase your overall attendee count noticeably. Be sure to announce the winners of any competitions or contests to the general populace at a time when all can recognize them, to help build participation for this event next year.

7) Show the Value, Not the City

If your meeting provides real value for the attendees, offers features for everyone can find beneficial, and gives your members a way to connect with their peers and colleagues, the city is a distant third on the list of reasons to attend – so why does so much of the current marketing material showcase and theme off of the destination city? Granted there are funds to be had by collaborating with the local CVB to help promote the destination, but that does not mean that the city is going to resonate with your members' needs for a conference. They may have had a bad experience with or in that city, not have reasonably convenient flights in from their home location, or not be much of a draw for a segment of your membership for whatever reason. Why risk alienating a segment of your membership by leading the charge with the city. If you offer good content, your marketing should be able to substitute the city name for any other at will, with no negative effect on offer value, graphic presentation or registration rate. Take this test: pull your latest conference promotion and substitute Ottumwa, Iowa, for the destination name currently there, and see if your meeting value proposition drops or if your imagery or graphics no longer make any sense. If so, you are depending too heavily on the city's cache to attract attendees, and at some point you will hit a clinker and your meeting attendance will drop precipitously for no apparent reason.

8) Let Them Know You Care

Once you have garnered a registration from a member, that should be the beginning of the conversation, not the end. Keep in touch with your registrants almost as rigorously as you do your prospects, and your no-show rate will drop precipitously, boosting actual attendance. Offer special discounts for registering before a certain deadline above and beyond the usual earlybird special. Cut rates for those who register online rather than by mail to encourage online registration. Offer free transportation to the conference venue from a series of destination hotels if they register by a certain date to encourage early registration. The more you over-deliver and under-promise, the more likely they are to actually board the plane and attend, and still feel great about the experience.

9) Let Them Pay *Their* Way

Make paying for the meeting easy, convenient and reasonable. Allow for the broadest range of payment methods possible, including adding their registration costs to their dues invoice for the year (for a slight increase in price), take all the credit cards you can, accept checks both personal and corporate, offer discounts for multiple registrations on one bill, anything to make payment easy for the attendee. The more open you are to such options, the more likely they will make an effort to find a way to pay you to attend, and the more creative they will be in arranging for that payment. Couched properly and priced correctly, pay-up rates won't suffer significantly, and your attendance figures will rise beyond any additional risk incurred.

10) Let Them Bring Some Moral Support

Flying to a strange city, finding the conference venue, signing up for the “right” seminars, attending functions populated by strangers, and making it home again can be daunting for a certain segment of your membership, especially the newest members, who might not have attended one of your events and don't know what to expect. Increase their comfort zone and reduce their trepidation by offering a reduced rate if they bring a friend or colleague. Traveling together is a great bonding experience and can make things easier, sharing rides to the airport and the venue, attending sessions together and comparing notes, etc. By subsidizing the Buddy System, you have just increased your attendance by 25% but only increased your costs by 12.5% - not a bad formula.

Whatever you do to promote your meetings, boosting attendance year over year will be especially tough when the economy takes a turn into negative territory. The more you are willing to give now the more your efforts will pay benefits when things get better. You will have increased your penetration of your membership, boosted their loyalty, and given them a reason to spread the word to their peers and industry colleagues about the value of your meetings and your organization as a whole.

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