Appealing to the Target Group

Steps To Planning Successful Reunions

By Shannon Rasmussen

The key to planning a successful reunion, whether for an organization, a family or a school, is creating an event that appeals to the target group. Given the countless demands on people’s time and resources, smart reunion planners will create experiences that attendees want to be part of.

“The most important consideration is getting to know that specific group and their needs,” said Najauna White, national sales manager for Discover Durham (N.C.). “People assume we’re going to provide generic options but we stay away from those and we work to understand the group’s expectations and goals for the event. We help them build a sentimental connection in our city.”

Martisha LaCroix, founder and CEO of LaCroix Events in State Park, S.C., who has organized a number of family reunions, agreed that, contrary to popular belief, reunions don’t have to be basic. While it’s OK to have a picnic or to host the event at someone’s house, the way to entice people to get involved is to offer new opportunities and new experiences that will expose the group members to things they have never done before, she said.

“I’m a big advocate of live events because they change your perspective,” LaCroix said. “When you go to a new city, even if you’re connecting with ▶

Downtown Durham, N.C., is home to many cultural attractions, festivals and special events.
people you already know, you’re having a new shared experience. When you’re getting together in a new place with family members, you’ll have conversations you might not have had otherwise. You’ll learn your family’s legacy and you might even discover things, like where your own entrepreneurial spirit comes from.”

Identify Goals Before Selecting Activities
Just as conferences have themes, such as innovation or entrepreneurship, reunions should also have a focus, White said. She encourages groups to think about the purpose of the event. In the early stages, reunion planners should identify a goal for the reunion to help determine what they hope to get out of the event, she said.

Once they’ve determined that, choosing activities and venues becomes much easier.

“Ask yourself why you’re coming to this particular city and what you hope to accomplish,” White said. “If you haven’t seen each other in a long time, your focus might be on reconnecting with the members of the group, so you’ll likely choose activities that encourage personal connections. If you see each other pretty regularly, you might choose a different kind of activity to achieve a different purpose.”

White believes that a well-designed event will prompt people to take part because they don’t want to miss out on the experience of connecting with a particular group of people in an exciting new place.

“Instead of creating a sense of obligation that people should come to the reunion, we create a sense that you’d be crazy to miss out on this great event,” she said.

Consider Attendees’ Personal Needs
LaCroix said that personalization is the key to a successful reunion and suggested many small details, which can be included in the logistical planning of an event, to address a range of individual needs.

Consider, for example, that some members of the family might collect Hilton points that they’d like to use to attend the reunion. Then consider that others might be fans of the Marriott family of hotels. LaCroix said she has helped reunion planners find accommodations that include three different hotels in the same parking lot. This type of effort in the planning stages makes it easier for members of the group to attend because they can personalize their visit and control their own costs.

In addition, LaCroix said, she encourages people to think beyond the traditional summertime dates for these kinds of events.

“It sounds crazy but consider hosting your reunion around Thanksgiving or Christmas,” LaCroix said. “People assume that it will cost more but the truth is that many hotels don’t see a lot of business during the holiday season. If you can bring in holiday business, many hotels will have the flexibility to work with you on cost. Plus, the kids are out of school and you’re planning to spend the holidays with family anyway.”

Most reunion groups do have budgetary
For military reunions, reconnection is the most important goal, according to Warren Isenhour, president of Isehoun International, an event management firm in Murfreesboro, Tenn. He explained that veterans' groups intentionally seek face-to-face gatherings because their relationships are based on shared service and interaction.

“They much prefer gathering in person to see each other and talk about things going on in their lives,” he said. “They crave the communal interaction piece. They crave the time spent together.”

Larry Orvis, who plans military reunions for Visit Pensacola, works with primarily Navy and Marine units who choose the Florida city because of its beautiful beaches and its proximity to numerous military venues. Orvis hosts groups from the World War II, Korean and Vietnam conflicts, who come to the area to reconnect with fellow service members and experience new places.

He said the variety of offerings in Pensacola create a connection for the service members, as well as for the family members who travel with them.

“Some of our visitors are part of what I call a living line, in which grandpa was in the military and he’s coming back with his grandkids and his own son who serves in the military,” Orvis said. “Our Navy museum and the flight center offer something for younger visitors as well, and they put them in the military atmosphere at least for a brief period.”

Seek Assistance From Local Experts
The primary concern for these military groups is often cost and they often have unique expectations for their accommodations, including rooms for their memorabilia and the freedom to provide their own snacks and drinks.

The key to controlling the budget, White said, is to enlist the help of the convention and visitors bureau to capitalize on opportunities that fit within the group’s budget.

“One of the things we do well is work with our local partners to help groups find the most relevant local offerings during the visit,” she said. “We’re looking to create experiences for our visiting groups.”

LaCroix, Orvis and White each pointed out that their services to reunion groups don’t end at coordinating the events and the lodging. Each said they follow up by marketing the event to the group members and staying connected with the planners so they can support them all the way up to the event.

“Think of me like your middleman,” White said. “There are countless services we can provide in the days leading up to your event. While you’re planning whether to have cheesecake or carrot cake for your guests, we’ll handle the travel plans and the booking process so you can focus on figuring out what’s really important to your guests. We’re going to provide all the materials you need to produce a great reunion.”

3 TIPS For Reunion Planners
Planning a reunion can feel daunting because the members of a group may vary in age, interests and a variety of other ways.

In order to help navigate the process, the experts who work in the industry have provided tips to help reunion planners know where to start.

1. Utilize Planners & CVB
   “We attend conferences and educational events that help us stay up-to-date on the industry,” said Martisha LaCroix of LaCroix Events. “We’re in the room with these hotels and these venues, and they are telling us what they have to offer and what they need. Utilize that to your advantage.”

2. Take Turns Planning
   “When you get different people in the family to share the planning responsibility, especially if you choose different generations, you get a different experience,” said Najauna White, national sales manager for Discover Durham. “It allows something fresh and new each time you get together.”

3. Practice Follow-Through
   “I don’t want someone to feel like we stopped paying attention once they finalized their plans,” said Larry Orvis of Visit Pensacola. “I go to the farewell breakfasts each time because if something went wrong with the event, that’s where they’ll discuss it. I don’t ask them directly about complaints. I just go and eat and listen to what they are saying. Sometimes they say a lot and I can try to correct the things that went wrong.”