Association Meetings:
the Right Mix at the Right Price

Creating Memorable Experiences Without Breaking the Bank
By Selena Chavis

Association meeting planners face a perfect storm of budget constraints, higher audience expectations and declining attendance. Generating interest that will convince busy professionals - and organizations that may be footing the bill - to invest resources or sacrifice time away from the office requires that associations deliver the all-important element: value.

“One of the biggest trends we are seeing right now is associations being concerned about overall cost,” said Jeff Hornad, Vice President Convention Sales & Services, Memphis Tourism. “They want to provide the best experience at a price affordable to their attendees, so many associations are looking to second-tier cities for that value. While they are looking for the best value, they still want to provide that “bucket-list city” experience that will draw in a large-enough attendee base.”

Across generations, genders and a wide variety of interests, achieving the right mix at the right price is no easy feat, especially since today’s attendees are increasingly savvy. Simply put, the days of cookie-cutter meetings and
annual events that feature the typical keynote followed by endless lecture-hall breakout sessions are over.

The key is understanding the macro trends impacting the industry and then drilling down into the specific micro needs of an association’s attendees, said Suzanne Powell, president of the Utility Technology Association. As producer of two annual educational conferences for a niche professional group, both held at The Hotel at Auburn University in Auburn, Ala., Powell noted that the single most important element at the organization’s events, aside from education, is networking.

“Allowing time for that and designing the program such that it is not just class after class is critical,” she said. That means breaks must be long enough to support “meet and greet” opportunities and the physical setup must promote comfortable conversation. “The classroom is not the only thing they are at the event for. We also want to make sure that networking is part of their evening activities,” Powell said.

While networking may be the main ingredient for one conference, high-energy problem-solving sessions or off-beat entertainment may fill the bill for a different group. That’s why today’s meeting planners, destination professionals and venues must identify the value proposition of a meeting for every audience, a challenge for the average resource-strapped group.

“Demand is up and supply is tight, leading to pressure on an association’s bottom line,” said Robert Reso, vice president of convention sales with New Orleans & Company. “Attendees have a choice to attend or not, so creating a memorable setting is critical.” He emphasized that the best path for destinations is to be transparent, openly review the hot-button items with clients and explain why the experience a destination offers will bring attendees back. “We understand that every group has a budget and that attendance is driven by the content of the meeting, as well as the selection of the destination.”

Understanding Your Audience

Today’s workforce is composed of five generations, although Millennials recently surpassed Generation X as the largest group in the workforce, according to Pew Research. To accommodate the many different perspectives and interests, it’s incumbent upon organizations to

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**Sponsorship X-Factor**

At a time when association meeting planners are trying to do more with less, sponsorships are a great way to get a bottom-line boost. Yet, according to Robert Reso, vice president of convention sales with New Orleans & Company, many events seeking sponsors fail to identify the return on investment, leaving the targeted company to do its own calculations.

The authors of an Eventbrite ebook titled “How to Win Sponsors for Your Event (and Bring Them Back Every Year)” suggested asking the following six questions to shape the value proposition for a potential sponsor:

1. What are your sponsor’s key objectives?
2. What do they need to be successful?
3. How will sponsoring your event benefit this company?
4. How does your event tie to their brand?
5. How does your event tie to their marketing objectives?
6. Why are you targeting this company as opposed to other similar companies?

The ebook also emphasized the importance of answering these questions when pitching a potential sponsor and in any follow-up correspondence. For example: “Remember that many companies doing sponsorships have a limited budget, well-defined objectives and are not eager to spend with another event. They’re not searching for new sponsorship opportunities — but they may entertain your proposal if they see a fit with their objectives.”

Reso offered one additional tip: “The best motivator to help someone understand why sponsorship is beneficial to them is a testimonial from a previous sponsor — and preferably from a competitor!”

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Meet attendees outside New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center

![Attendees outside New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center](image-url)
to broaden experiences for all attendees. Reso noted that meeting planners are doing a good job at addressing generational gaps, although this transformation doesn’t happen overnight.

“IT begins with information from and about your membership,” he said. “Invest appropriately and commission a comprehensive survey to discover where your organization may be doing well and where you may be missing the mark. Creating a director-level position within the organization to implement a plan is important as well but will only succeed if your board and senior leadership [are] committed.”

For the conferences sponsored by the Utility Technology Association, understanding the audience means recognizing that 95 percent of the 300 to 400 attendees at each event are older men. “We have to take into account things like food portion sizes and the kinds of food we choose,” Powell said. In addition, she pointed out that her audience is less impressed with having a lot of extra technological bells and whistles but they do appreciate the convenience of online registration and paying by credit card.

While it’s important to acknowledge that attendees from all generations evaluate life differently, the most important consideration when it comes to planning for any audience is the “why,” Reso said.

“Until you can develop a compelling ‘why,’” all potential attendees will insert their own personal beliefs on why they should attend your meeting,” he said. “For the seasoned attendees, they can reflect on past experiences and create a benchmark of what a successful meeting means to them. For the attendees just beginning their foray into the convention-attendance world, many will form their opinion based on what others have shared.”

For these reasons, Reso suggested that it’s best that association leadership teams get out in front of perception and create their own messaging around the “why.”

Making the Most of Technology
Reso emphasized that it doesn’t matter if attendees are Baby Boomers, Generation Xers or Millennials – everyone is using technology today. “Your association meeting needs to embrace the trends and identify what works best for your audience,” he said. “But don’t just latch on to the latest fad – consult the experts. Audio/visual providers and production companies employ some of the best and brightest when it comes to using technology, so plan some exploratory meetings with your vendors and examine the benefits and the investment necessary.”

Hornad said that meeting planners now expect fast and reliable Wi-Fi to accommodate the expectation of attendees. In addition, she noted that attendees are also looking to download a meeting-specific app, where they can conveniently access all needed information related to an event, such as a schedule, special offerings, food and beverage locations, and registration options.

Savvy meeting planners recognize the power of social media both as a promotional tool and a way to keep open communication lines with constituents. “Social media provides the meetings and convention industry with a great listening tool,” Hornad said. “It allows constant communication between associations and event attendees, as well as a platform for real-time updates. The visual content that can be produced for social media gives associations another piece of shareable content to get the word out about their meeting or event.”