

BY MICHELLE RUSSELL |

The Breakfast Club

Great discussions are on the menu at
the Experient Breakfast

“YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME” WAS THE FAMILIAR REFRAIN FROM THE movie “Field of Dreams.” If only meeting planners had it that easy. * But for the past several years, meeting-and-event-services company Experient has been quietly holding industry roundtables (at around 7 a.m., no less) for which that mantra is more a reality than a dream — with consistently fewer than five no-shows among more than 100 invitees. * Among meeting professionals who know, “The Experient Breakfast” has become a must-attend event. Experient hosts the meal for clients and potential clients during industry conventions, including the PCMA Annual Meeting, MPI World Education Congress, ASAE & The Center Annual Meeting & Expo, and IAEE’s Annual Meeting & Exhibition. But the

gathering is not what you might think ... a chance for the company to showcase its services. In fact, according to Bill Reed, Experient's senior vice president of strategic sales, not a word is spoken about the company. Rather, the Experient Breakfast is a forum for meetings and association executives to "simply talk about what's on their minds," Reed said, "and learn from each other without any structure imposed on them."

If it's not about self-promotion, then what's in it for Experient? "It's a great way for us to get our finger on the pulse of our industry," Reed said. "Not only are we able to hear first-hand about the challenges that keep planners and association executives up at night, by creating this forum, we can help be part of the solution."

What entices attendees to get up at the crack of dawn? "The Experient Breakfast was an opportunity to network and relate with peers whom I did not know," said Gregg Balko, executive director of the Society for the Advancement of Material and Process Engineering. "It provided valuable ideas and information on key issues from very different perspectives."

In order to facilitate discussion, Experient arranges the room in round tables of about eight. Participants are assigned to tables, with thought given to creating like-minded groups. The table decides the topic they want to explore together. An Experient staff "scribe" is assigned to each table to get the conversation started and take notes — and it's this part of the process that makes the Experient Breakfast particularly valuable.

The notes from all the table discussions are organized according to topic and then e-mailed after the event to all those who attended. In this way, the breakfast participants not only benefit from the one-time networking session they participated in, but also have a chance to reinforce their own takeaways — and learn from the other table discussions — before the event fades from memory. ■

Editor's Note: *Convene* readers now have their own place at the table. Look for more notes cribbed from the Experient Breakfast in this new series.

► **Michelle Russell** is editor in chief of *Convene*.

Exhibitor and Trade Show Issues

Here's a page taken from the most recent Experient Breakfast, held in August at ASAE & The Center's Annual Meeting & Expo:

The group discussed many of the issues that are involved with association trade shows and the unique roles that they play in the association budget.

► Participants posed the challenge of feedback from exhibitors to keep their participation costs down while association costs are increasing. Exhibitors are resisting increases to booth-space rates, and are looking at total cost of exhibiting (travel, time out of the office, promotional costs, drayage, etc.) and are expecting the association to address all these aspects, some of which may be out of the control of any association. The suggestion was offered to make sure you understand the budget cycle of your exhibitors. If there will be increased costs, you need to advise them before their budget for that year is completed. If rate increases are communicated after budget is done, you will get more feedback if for no

other reason than their ability to work with a fixed budgeted amount. One organization is bundling the cost of drayage and lead-retrieval equipment into one package so that the exhibitor does not have to keep writing separate checks along the way.

► One participant is now negotiating free wireless Internet access as a concession for dates in 2016, believing that by that time, all locations will have free Wi-Fi. The intention is to reduce the incidental cost of exhibiting since many exhibitors need Internet connections in their booth today. One participant mentioned that their exhibitors complain about the costs, but the majority of them renew their contracts within the first four hours of space becoming available. The group agreed that, in this scenario, you are fine since if it were a deal-breaker, they would not contract to come back. Remember that it is their job to make sure they are getting the best prices possible and you need to keep pushing the envelope to ensure their loyalty.

► Attendees do not understand the complexities of labor rules and have the perception that the association is bringing in this large event and should be able to make these provisions disappear. The group discussed the need for creativity in maximizing the four-hour minimums that often accompany labor requests in convention centers. One cited that if a four-hour minimum is paid for, even though the task may only require one hour, they will insist on the labor to be available for their use for the full four hours "just in case." Another suggested that the association look at using destinations that have convention centers that have non-union labor or less stringent regulations.

► Some are using RFID more often now in the trade-show area. One said they were able to track traffic flow in quadrants of their floor plan and that has enabled them to charge premium prices for booths within the popular quadrants. The ability to document and show statistics to potential exhibitors to justify the added premium space fees is key.



RISE AND SHINE: Experient's Bill Reed wants to know what's keeping planners up at night.