

How to Boost Attendance

By Marian Calvin

Given the number of items on your meeting management “to do” list — negotiating rates and space, analyzing contracts, sending out requests for proposals, planning the program, making food and beverage decisions — you might be tempted to “steal,” or reallocate some time (and funds) from the marketing of your meeting. But that could prove to be a costly mistake. Need convincing?

Consider the fact that the annual meeting is the single largest source of non-dues revenue for most associations. Also consider the fact that most exhibitors view a sizable base of interested, qualified buyers as the linchpin of a successful trade show. Consequently, it’s in the best fiscal interest of your organization to ensure that as many delegates as possible turn out for your event. Promotion is the key to increasing attendance figures, provided that the rest of the “Four Ps” — product, price, and place — have been properly developed.

Do Your Homework

Before drafting the marketing plan for your next meeting, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you certain that you’re offering the best educational program to your audience? Do you ask your attendees and members (including those who do not attend) what they need to know and learn to prosper professionally and personally? Are you responding to their needs? Do you actively seek grants, partnerships, and

sponsorships that will help you afford to bring the best to your delegates?

- Are the cities you choose affordable and accessible? Are the room rates suitable? Are your registration fees reasonable and competitive while yielding acceptable profit margins?
- Are the time of year and the day of week pattern easy to sell to your audience? (Educators are usually free in the summer, while entrepreneurs of any ilk may have a hard time pulling away from their source of income on weekdays.)
- Is your event scheduled so as not to compete with other industry (public and private) events or your own organization’s regional events?
- Is your marketing database the most comprehensive and accurate it can be? Has it been tested, corrected, and USPS-certified? Have you captured the names of all potential attendees from Web inquiries, product purchases, membership inquiries, exhibitor surveys, and marketing alliances with related associations?

- Are your conference mailings frequent enough and timely? Do respondents have sufficient time to budget for the event, get permission to attend the event, and benefit from the early-bird registration cutoff date and the hotel cutoff date in general? Is your program printed far enough in advance to allow you to take advantage of the significantly cheaper, yet slower, nonprofit or bulk mail rates?
- Are you missing opportunities to promote your meeting? Frequently missed opportunities include e-mail signatures, broadcast fax cover sheets, letterhead, ads and articles in every newsletter and magazine you produce, inserts in dues renewal letters and all other outbound

correspondence, announcements to the trade press, and splashy unveilings at the previous year's convention and all mid-term events. Do you provide your local chapters and exhibitors with turnkey packages that enable them to support the marketing of the national meeting?

Keep in mind that many activities are competing with your conference for a share of a potential attendee's time and discretionary funds these days. Less personal time; shrinking educational budgets; and an increasing number of educational opportunities available locally, regionally, and on the Internet are forcing meeting managers to create a more sophisticated, quantifiable approach to marketing than ever before.

Sample Marketing Timeline

14 months out —

Select graphic design/marketing firm. Prepare meeting theme, logo, and introduction for unveiling at current year's event. Prepare exhibitor pre-prospectus. Prepare call for speakers. (Note: All information should be placed simultaneously on the organization's Web site and in vendor newsletters. Public relations team has parallel timeline.)

12 months out —

Unveil meeting theme, logo, and introduction at current year's convention. Provide preliminary destination information. Host committee and CVB should exhibit at event. Update media contacts in press room. Place call for speakers on Web site and hand out to speakers who will be returning. Program committee evaluates current year's speakers. Renew booth space on site using exhibitor pre-prospectus.

10 months out —

Distribute meeting dates to press and affiliated associations for their informational calendars. Begin exhibitor marketing and continue speaker acquisition. Thoroughly analyze current year's exhibitor and attendee evaluations and adjust program to address the issues.

9 months out —

Send out initial mailer (or broadcast fax and/or broadcast e-mail) to members and prospects, asking them to prepare their budgets, mark their calendars, and make plans to attend. Announce keynote speakers and entertainment if possible. Promote destination attractions. Create and approve registration and housing forms. Create PDF and/or interactive forms for Web site. Prepare confirmation letterhead, envelopes, and fax cover sheet.

9 to 6 months out —

Education committee updates members and exhibitors on key speakers and vendors signed up to date via Web site and newsletters. Prepare early-bird registration mailer. Prepare press releases and contact lists, complimentary trade show passes, and marketing materials for inclusion in exhibitor service kits. Send event logo to general service contractor for kit covers. Place event promotion ads in affiliated journals and association's publications.

6 months out —

Send out early-bird mailer. Include registration and housing forms for attendees and exhibitors. Develop preliminary program. Update Web site.

4 months out —

Mail preliminary program, providing specific information on speakers, educational sessions, and the destination as well as registration and housing forms. Post registration and housing forms on Web site. Develop final program mailer. Send list of pre-registered attendees to exhibitors for their pre-event promotions.

3 months out —

Send out final program mailer. Organize public relations efforts for venue and local attendance. Prepare/place ads in local publications if appropriate. Send last-chance broadcast fax or e-mail if necessary. Prepare promotional splash for next year's event for closing ceremony. Prepare materials for your own booth in exhibit hall or welcome area.

Immediately before event —

Prepare directory, proceedings, and on-site materials, including art for signage, sponsor banners, at-a-glance agendas with room assignments, miscellaneous attendee instructions, message boards, emergency contact information, and other bag stuffers as needed.

— *Marian Calvin*

Do the Math

According to the Professional Convention Management Association's Ninth Annual Meetings Market Survey, marketing and promotion account for 11.1 percent of event expenses. Compare this figure to the amount that you are spending to promote your event. Are you spending enough? Too much? Let's calculate.

Assume your attendance goal is 1,500 — an increase of 5 percent over the previous year — and your registration fee is \$500. If you achieve your goal, you would generate \$750,000 in gross revenue. If you spend the industry average of 11 percent to secure this attendance, your out-of-pocket marketing expenses would be \$82,500 or \$55 for each registered attendee.

Given that the acceptable rate of return for direct mail is at most 3 percent, you would need to mail at least 50,000 total pieces to net 1,500 attendees ($.03 \times 50,000 = 1,500$). With a budget of \$82,500, your cost per mailer would be \$1.65 including postage. But since research has shown that people need to see your message at least three times before they respond, your cost per mailer would drop to 55 cents. Since this is a low unit cost, you would need to be creative with your distribution costs by including the piece with your monthly newsletter or as a polybagged insert with your journal to save on postage. Advance planning is key.

Create a Timeline

The development and utilization of an annual marketing plan and timeline is a tool that will help streamline advance-planning issues. If you rely heavily on board members and volunteer committees, a timeline is a particularly valuable tool. It contains all deadlines so that both staff and volunteers know exactly what is expected of them. It serves as a volunteer recruitment device, allowing prospective volunteers to either commit to the time frame outlined or decide that their schedules won't allow them to participate. And it empowers everyone — volunteers, staff members, and potential speakers — to be on the same page at the same time.

Create the timeline with all deadlines and cutoff dates backed up from the date of the event, including sufficient time for development, layout, printing, and distribution in order to avoid rush fees. Following are a few examples of the elements of a bare-bones timeline:

Initial mailing

The purpose of an initial mailing, most likely a postcard, is to prepare the recipients to act. It should inform them to

mark their calendars, prepare travel budgets, check the organization's Web site regularly for updates and prepare them to be dazzled at the upcoming event. Destination promotion can be included here along with information about any new educational elements resulting from last year's evaluation. Be sure to send the initial mailer during budget planning time for your industry, typically six to nine months out.

Second mailing

The goal of this mailing is to encourage early registration. The piece, mailed four weeks before the early-bird cutoff date (or eight to 10 weeks before the hotel cutoff date), should include registration and housing forms in addition to finalized information on keynote speakers and seminar topics and presenters.

Final mailing

The purpose of the final mailing, sent out a minimum of three weeks before the hotel cutoff date, is to ask for the order and close on it. It should include all the information that potential attendees need to know to commit — final agenda, list of exhibitors to date, names and photos of all speakers, airline and car rental discounts, optional tours, registration and housing forms, and anything else that will entice them to attend.

You should be able to determine whether an additional marketing push is needed by figuring out the date, historically, by which half of your attendees are usually registered. If the numbers are lagging at that point, you may want to add another mailer, broadcast e-mail, or fax to the mix.

For each element on the timeline, provide a final copy approval deadline, final layout approval deadline, blueline or press proof approval deadline, and mail date. All dates should be realistic, firm, and shared with all parties as early in the marketing cycle as possible.

When all elements of the event — from site selection to program planning to exhibit sales — are promoted via a well-oiled marketing machine, the inevitable benefit is increased attendance and satisfied delegates and exhibitors.

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