

What's Next in Meetings and Conferences?

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Conference attendee attention is getting more and more difficult to capture and maintain. If the average adult gives a TV show 3 seconds to capture their attention, what chance does a conference presenter have in communicating an educational message in 60 or 90 minutes. Most of us are used to “information out” sessions where the presenter recommends a topic, an educational committee concurs that it fits their educational goals and the presenter delivers the session. Are the attendees tuned in? If not, why not and what’s next in the world of conference education?

The same questions apply to the expo. Why aren’t attendees visiting the expo as they did in the past? Are they getting all that they need to know to make a purchasing decision from field sales or from on-line sources? Are they receiving information about new products, services and offerings through some other channels other than trade shows or conference expos? What will make them tune in to create a value-based environment for both buyers and sellers?

Technology is clearly the most significant trend. Technology will affect how we attract attendees to conferences and meetings, how information is transmitted and how attendees are engaged before, during and after events. It is how visitor involvement is tracked and generated through mobile devices.

Source: MPI

Through our research, that was conducted via interviews, published articles or published studies we uncovered two over-riding drivers and trends affecting trade shows, meetings and conferences: (1) The global economic situation that continues to affect the meetings and convention industry and will do so for another year or two and (2) technology – the way we attract attendees, communicate ideas, transmit learning and generate audience participation at events.



Let's look at four elements that are driving conference programming and organization of expos:

Attendance

Continues to be a challenge depending on the sector (Engineering, Scientific, Healthcare) and will continue to be so in light of the globalization of the exhibition industry. In the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), there appears to be an expansion of international engineering and scientific meeting organizers in both venues and scope of offerings. Customer loyalty will be key to continued affiliation with associations and their events. Attendees have to be given a reason to attend the conference, participate in sessions and visit exhibits. Otherwise, they will opt to undertake something that is more pressing on their personal agendas.

The traditional engage, qualify, communicate and close approach to exhibiting is passé. Why? Much of what was delivered by sales reps in exhibits is now received through other means, such as electronic communications, technical journals, and networking with other professionals. Product introductions are not save for the once-a-year trade show. So, exhibitors need to create a motivation to drive audiences to their exhibits. Like organizing pre-arranged appointments with defined targets for specific discussions.





Demographics

According to www.conferencealerts.com there are over 280 “engineering conferences worldwide”. As audiences shift from the Boomer generation to the Millennials, meeting and event organizers are going to have to shift their focus from “information out” to “attendee driven content.” Methods of communicating, attracting attendee participation, educational content delivery and interaction will need to change to match their desire for the “what I want, when I want it and how I want it” mentality.

Exhibits & Venues

The net square footage sold and the size of exhibits will be heavily affected by the uncertain and changing global economic conditions. We have seen a small uptick in the number of attendees, exhibitors and net square footage sold (+1.1%, +2.5%, respectively, year-over-year 2012 vs. 2013). As exhibitors evaluate their face-to-face investments, they will resize their exhibits accordingly, based on the impact the economy has had on their organizations. With innovation being the driver, we can expect to see an increase in the number of smaller more vertical events and fewer larger meetings. Exhibit staffing will change to address the attendee need for more focused and detailed dialogue vs. a sales detail.

Digital technology, in the form of virtual events will become more commonplace to provide extension of face-to-face events. Social media and mobile devices will be used for pre-at-post event communications.

Technology related to exhibits & venues – As innovations in technology mature, systems that provide “match-making” between exhibitors and attendees will become more prevalent. RFID will provide exhibitors and convention organizers with streamlined processes, conserve resources and reduce costs (Delphi Study, p.13).



Digital technology, in the form of virtual events will become more commonplace to provide extension of face-to-face events. Social media and mobile devices will be used for pre-at-post event communications. Social media and smart phones will become new tools for promotion campaigns (Delphi Study, p.35) as well as a potential threat to the organizer since communications are user generated and outside the control of the event producer.

Education

Information transmittal through traditional educational events will change as forums move more from push type sessions to attendee driven programming, as well as through digital technology applications in distance training modes. Peer driven/un-conference sessions



appear to be leading the trends in conference education formats. Face-to-face is considered number one and will continue to be so since attendees desire to be in the presence of and gain access to thought leaders. There appears to be continued growth in the regional/state/local events due to more focused education, localized communications, networking with peers in the geographic area, less time away from the office and more affordability. Note: A good read on the concept of audience driven content is “Conferences that Work” by Adrian Segar.



Technology related to Education - Associations appear to be conservative in the speed at which they are adopting innovations to assure they are permanent and not just “trendy.” Social media appears to be a part of all association and show organizer communication strategies, however it is still very developmental in terms of how it plays out in attracting, involving and maintaining interest in the event. The use of mobile apps will be the single largest change regarding how information is transmitted over the next few years, as more and more attendees are equipped with advanced mobile devices for pod casts, virtual events and MR applications. Meeting professionals are rethinking traditional conference formats, such as keynotes with seated audiences, to ones that are more collaborative. Regional educational events with the use of ARS (Audience Response Systems) to assess “gap analysis” improves the overall education offerings for associations. Virtual exhibitions may become an accepted alternative to the physical event when videos, pictures and documents are needed to more effectively communicate than is possible in the face-to-face environment. This technology will also be used to complement established events.



Next Big Trends

It appears that the next new trends for the b-to-b, scientific, engineering and healthcare conferences, meetings and expos are:

- o Judicious application of new technologies and sophisticated measurement techniques
- o Strategic alliances to bring more to the event than in the past
- o Satisfying attendees who have a declining attention span and zero tolerance for failure through new approaches to conference education and the buy/sell relationship among the attendees
- o The desire to keep the meeting fresh and cutting edge using new technologies, alternative approaches and formats
- o Interest driven exposition organization where the attendees chose which exhibitors they will spend time with in advance of the event making advancing the sales cycle even more effective



Note: Delphi Study, the International Exhibition Industry and its Future...looking ahead to 2020, Outlook, Challenges, Results, Trends, UFI - The Global Association of Exhibition Industry 2012.





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