

Tips for Executing Exceptional Conferences, Meetings, and Workshops

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Abstract

The three of us, combined, have organized or attended more than 500 events, including meetings, conferences, workshops, and symposia, around the world. After participating in so many events, we concluded that a guide for hosting a successful event is greatly needed. Too often, an event is negatively affected by preventable issues, such as poor planning, a terrible venue, unskilled speakers, ineffective moderators, bad food service, or technical difficulties. In this article, we provide practical guidelines for planning and executing smooth-running, well-received events.

Advance Planning

Advance planning is the most important part of hosting a successful event. For small (20 to 60 people), somewhat informal events, 3 to 6 months is usually adequate. For larger events, allocate 12 to 18 months to minimize stress, delegate necessary tasks, and give speakers adequate preparation time. Although our focus for most of this article is on big events, the tips we provide apply to smaller events as well.

The event must include current, relevant information with great appeal to your intended audience. Therefore, identify the need(s) to be addressed, the event objectives, and the target audience. Once a topic area is selected, send out emails or postcards to solicit comments and suggestions from likely attendees (through individual contacts, professional lists, or attendees at previous events with a similar audience). Although only 10 to 20 percent of possible attendees are likely to respond, their input about specific hot topics and potential speakers is invaluable.

Schedule your event for dates that do not conflict with another event in the same or associated field, and do not coincide with the busy season for the intended audience. Remember to avoid spring break for public schools. An event duration of 2 or 3 days is usually the most appealing. Ideally, schedule Tuesday, Wednesday, and/or Thursday, reserving Monday and Friday for travel.

Choose a venue within a short distance from a major airport for regional, national, or international events. Unless a remote location provides something critical to the event (e.g. field tour stops significant to the event's objective), choose a moderate- or large-size city. This provides more options for overnight accommodations, venues, and catering. In addition, people are more likely to attend an event where they can also visit other points of interest.

Delegation of responsibilities is paramount. Depending on the size and scope of the event, tasks, such as collecting registration fees, advertising, ordering food, inviting speakers, editing the proceedings, getting handouts printed, conducting a field tour, reserving rooms, operating the computer and projector, and others may be handled by a few or many individuals. Volunteers are commonly used, especially if their registration fee is reduced or waived; make sure their task is well defined and of manageable size and commitment.

Venue

Ensure the venue is comfortable so that listening to presentations is enjoyable. Always inspect potential facilities in advance to confirm optimal comfort and lighting. The best venues are university or hotel facilities that are specifically designed for professional events. Many venues waive room rental fees

if food and beverage expenses meet a minimum, contract-specified amount.

Ideal meeting rooms have comfortable, preferably padded, chairs with plenty of leg room and adequate space for personal belongings (figure 1). Tables should have sufficient space to take notes and set a beverage. A pitcher of water, glasses, and a bowl of hard candies at each table is a nice touch. Those candies are great for staving off hunger pangs before lunch or staying alert at the end of the day. The room should be warm enough that people do not need to wear a coat but not so warm that they are sleepy or sweating. Make sure the room will not be disturbed by distracting sounds; ask about pending construction plans and other groups that may be sharing the site. Networking during breaks is one of the most important parts of any event, so ensure ample space is available for people to mingle and chat. Consider proximity of the venue to eating establishments or shopping in order to keep attendees happy during free time.

The front of the room (i.e., speaker and screen) must be visible to the entire audience. Adjustable, easy-to-use lighting is essential. Dimming lights, preferably in the front of the room only, allows

images on the screen to be clear and bright while providing adequate light for people to take notes and see the speaker. Make sure windows can be fully shaded so that projected images can be seen.

If the event requires multiple rooms, ideally all rooms should be in the same building. Strive to make movement from one room to another as simple and direct as possible. If additional buildings or long distances are unavoidable, provide clear maps in the registration packet and allow adequate time for folks to navigate from one place to the next. Each meeting room should have a sign posted outside the room with the daily agenda for that particular meeting room. Each meeting room requires a moderator to keep everything running smoothly.

Speakers

Selecting speakers can be a challenge; consider their expertise and their style. A good start is to obtain suggestions through a postcard and/or email solicitation, online surveys, and consultation with colleagues. Ideally, every speaker will be well prepared, clear, informative, concise, and engaging. The audience appreciates those who are relaxed,



Figure 1. Event venues should be comfortable and spacious with good control over lighting. (Photo by Diane L. Haase, 2016)

lively, and even humorous. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know speaking styles ahead of time, and some speakers may be relatively dry and dull. These speakers, however, can still be quite positive to the event if their presentation content is timely and relevant to the attendees.

An especially popular or notable speaker may be designated as the “keynote”—someone who presents a broad overview and/or insightful reflection on the event’s focus. Some events have multiple keynote speakers to kick off each day or section of the agenda, while others do not have a keynote at all. A keynote speaker should only be included if you are confident of the speaker’s message, delivery, and appropriateness.

Invite speakers as early as possible. An email invitation is fine; make sure to give a brief description of the event, including target audience, dates, location, and what is expected of them (e.g. presentation length, proceedings paper, biographical information, etc.). Either ask potential speakers to present on a specific topic or provide them some suggested areas based on the focus of the event and their expertise. In addition to inviting speakers directly, a “call for speakers” can identify potential candidates. Keep in mind, however, that respondents to the “call for speakers” may be new to their field or still in graduate school. While many respondents will have excellent presentations and cutting-edge information to share, some may be inexperienced in public speaking. To ensure that the event content is rewarding for attendees, invite a solid base of speakers in addition to those who volunteer.

Maintain contact with speakers. Use regular reminders, initiated well in advance, to keep them focused on deadlines for submitting a brief biography, handout materials, or a proceedings manuscript. Additionally, give speakers guidelines for developing and formatting their presentations. These guidelines should include using fonts that are universal to most computers, text and graphics that are large enough for the audience to see, an emphasis on results rather than methods, and avoidance of slides saturated with text or graphics. Remind speakers that the agenda will be strictly adhered to and encourage them to practice their presentation so that it is within their allotted time and reserves at least 3 to 5 minutes for audience questions.

The Agenda

The agenda should begin with an introduction from one of the event organizers. This should include a welcome to the attendees, reiteration of event objectives, description of necessary logistics (safety, event timeframe, location of restrooms/meeting rooms/meals/field tour), and a request to turn off cell phones. Speaker time slots can range from 20 to 50 minutes depending on the speaker’s request, the number of speakers, and the overall time available (figure 2).

Day 1	
8:00	Continental breakfast
8:30	Welcome and introductions
8:40	Speaker #1
9:15	Speaker #2
9:50	Speaker #3
10:25	Break
10:50	Speaker #4
11:25	Speaker #5
12:00	Lunch
1:00	Field tour
6:00	Evening social/dinner
Day 2	
8:00	Continental breakfast
8:30	Speaker #6
9:05	Speaker #7
9:40	Speaker #8
10:15	Break
10:50	Speaker #9
11:25	Speaker #10
12:00	Lunch
1:00	Speaker #11
1:35	Speaker #12
2:10	Speaker #13
2:45	Adjourn

Figure 2. Sample agenda for a 2-day conference with 35-minute speaker slots, a field tour, and an evening social event.

Because listening to presentations for a full day can be mind numbing, do not schedule exceptionally long days. When a day is long, people tend to leave early, which is unfair to end-of-the-day speakers. Generally, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. is ideal and allows commuter time. To reduce the duration of sitting, subdivide days to include a poster session, a field trip, or an interactive activity such as a brainstorming/discussion or a hands-on session. Many events have a morning of formal presentations followed by an afternoon in the field. Consider ending the final day a bit early to accommodate travel needs.

Order speakers strategically to best capture the audience's attention. For example, group speakers who have similar topics and intersperse the most interesting speakers (hot topic areas or dynamic presentation styles). Because 25 percent or more of your audience often departs during the last break of a multi-day event, plan your concluding session carefully to include popular topics or speakers to keep the audience's attention (and attendance) for the entire event.

Schedule morning, lunch, and afternoon breaks to avoid having attendees sit for more than 2 hours at a time. One primary function of an event is the opportunity for networking. Therefore, allow adequate time for folks to interact with colleagues whom they may not see often. Schedule breaks for 30 minutes and lunches for 60 to 90 minutes. Generous break times also build in flexibility; if the agenda falls behind, the break or lunch can be shortened accordingly to get back on schedule. Conversely, if a speaker fails to appear, breaks can be extended. It is best, however, to start breaks within 5 to 10 minutes of their scheduled time to ensure the caterer is properly prepared. The audience greatly appreciates staying on schedule, so that should be a primary goal.

Make a plan for getting people to return after breaks. Often, people are so engrossed in their break-time conversations that it is difficult to get them back to their seats and resume the program. Yelling, whistling, or flashing lights can get the crowd's attention. One of the most effective ways we have found is to walk through the break area ringing a hand bell. Handing out a door prize at the beginning of a new session can also encourage attendees to return promptly (see Raffles and Contests later in this article).

Food

Good food is a must. There is nothing like a poorly done food service to elicit dozens of unhappy comments on the feedback forms.

Provide food and beverages about a half hour before the event begins each morning. This can range from a hearty breakfast buffet to a simple array of fruit, bagels, and pastries. Beverages, including caffeinated, noncaffeinated, and sugar-free choices (coffee, tea, soda, and water), should be available at each break. A light snack of fruit or cookies during the break is also nice. Provide recycling options and consider "green" products (e.g., a dispenser of cold water rather than bottles of water).

Arrange an appetizing lunch unless circumstances (e.g., a field trip) dictate a box lunch. A hot, buffet-style meal is usually best (figure 3). Serve from both sides of a table, or set up a second or third table, so that everyone has his or her food within 15 minutes. A meal served at the tables can be nice, but it is important to minimize



Figure 3. A tasty buffet lunch that can be served to all participants within 15 minutes is an effective and popular meal service for events. (Photo by R. Kasten Dumroese, 2016).

the wait time so that some diners are not starting dessert while others are still waiting for their salad. All menus should include vegetarian and gluten-free options. Make sure to provide plenty of fruits and vegetables in addition to choices for heartier appetites. And, do not forget dessert. Carefully consider the merit of a luncheon speaker; most attendees enjoy networking during professional events and lunches are a great time for conversations.

If lunch is “on your own,” allow a minimum of 90 minutes. Provide a map of nearby restaurants along with a brief description of the cuisine and price range. Check with restaurants beforehand for discount coupons or special rates for attendees.

Advertising, Registration, and Budget

Ideally, the conference agenda should be finalized at least 3 months ahead of time. Post it on a Website along with registration information, maps, hotel suggestions, and any other information that can assist people planning to attend the event. Keep all posted information up to date and ensure that it prints well in black and white. In addition, a registration brochure can be mailed to various professional lists. Sending an announcement to related professional groups and asking them to include it in their newsletter, Webpage, or calendar of events can also reach more potential attendees.

Many factors influence the registration fees. The most important factor to consider is ensuring that the anticipated revenue will cover all costs (venue rental, food, handouts, technical equipment, name badges, etc.). A two-tiered structure of early and late (25 to 35 percent higher) registration fees will encourage most attendees to register by the early date and thereby provide event organizers with a fairly accurate headcount for planning purposes. Waiving or reducing registration fees for speakers is a justifiable courtesy given the time they spend to prepare their presentations. Moreover, consider covering speakers’ travel expenses, including local accommodations, for those who travel long distances or have limited travel funds. Additionally, consider rewarding the planning committee, volunteers, speakers, and students with complimentary or reduced registration fees.

Sponsors/exhibitors usually receive one or two registrations with their sponsor/exhibitor fee, and

spouses are usually charged only for meals or optional field trips in which they participate. Plan the budget, meals, and travel accurately by including all paid, reduced-fee, and complimentary registrants in the registration database. The database may need a separate section for optional event revenue, such as that for evening banquets or field trips. Decide in advance if partial registrations will be accepted for a multiday event and ensure the registration person knows how to handle requests from people who wish to attend only a portion of the event.

An accurate, up-to-date, and on-demand registration database is vital to pre-event decisions on food, bus transportation, handout materials, and room setup. It is worthwhile to hire a service to process registrations because starting from scratch will take an inexperienced person considerable time and energy. A number of online services offer registration systems. Your registration system is essentially a data collection and accounting spreadsheet. In addition to name and contact information, be sure to include optional events, meal preferences, and specifics for the name badge, such as chapter or State society. Attendees will want the option to register online, over the phone, via surface mail, or by fax. They will also want to use credit cards, checks, or purchase orders, and a few will ask to be invoiced after the event. Accurate accounting is essential to determine who has paid and whose registration fees are still outstanding. Confirming registration with an email is inexpensive and timely; receipts may be sent or provided during registration. You or your registration service should expect a variety of questions regarding lodging, program, venue, and payments. List only one phone number for any questions on the registration form and other materials.

Revenue sources include registration fees, sponsorships, and exhibitor fees. Base the anticipated revenue on a lower-than-expected attendance number to protect the event from losses if economics, weather, or other factors put a damper on registration numbers. (Do not forget to include the complimentary or reduced-fee registrations in the estimates.) While past event attendance may provide some guidance in estimating future attendance, base the event budget on conservative estimates of attendance and associated expenses. This is particularly true in estimating sponsorship support, which can be unreliable.

Expenses fall into two categories: fixed and variable. Fixed expenses can include brochure design and printing, Webpage management, postage, speaker travel/honorarium, registration services, credit-card bank fees, room rental, and audiovisual equipment rental. Variable expenses are those that fluctuate with attendance and include meals, breaks, buses for field trips, event souvenirs, tables for exhibitors, and printed handouts. The largest expense by far is for food and beverages. Be sure to account for any gratuity and taxes; these can add 25 percent to the listed price of meals and breaks, and sometimes to the rental costs of audiovisual equipment and rooms.

Technical Equipment

Prepare the principal computer and projector at least an hour before the first presentation each day. A complete backup system is always a good idea. Nowadays, nearly all speakers use PowerPoint® for their presentations. Although speakers may provide a PowerPoint® file of their presentations ahead of time for handouts, they are likely to make last-minute revisions and bring a new version the day of their presentation on a USB (Universal Serial Bus) flash drive (also called a thumb drive or memory stick). Assign an experienced person to load speaker presentations and operate the computer during the event. A good practice is to rename files, usually by the speaker's last name, as they are uploaded to the desktop, so that they can be located easily. Ensure the computer has the latest PowerPoint® software and an array of fonts. Before the actual presentation, always open the file to ensure the fonts and graphics display properly. Position the computer (or a second monitor) so that it faces the speaker; even if the screen is several feet away, it can help cue the speaker so that he or she does not need to turn away from the audience to look at the projected image. Have a remote for the computer so the speaker can easily advance the presentation (figure 4). Low-cost USB remotes work well and usually have a laser pointer built in (if not, provide a separate laser pointer). Keep extra batteries ready.

Wireless microphones are best. Most speakers like to wander rather than be tied to a podium or microphone stand, and stationary microphones must be repeatedly raised or lowered. Position the wireless

microphone on the speaker's shirt about 6 in (15 cm) below the chin so that it picks up the voice clearly and the volume does not fade if the speaker turns his or her head from side to side (figure 4). Have a spare microphone and batteries on hand.



Figure 4. Wireless microphones and computer remotes with laser pointers are useful tools for speakers to deliver their presentation smoothly. (Photos by Diane L. Haase, 2016)

Moderators

The role of the moderator is to introduce speakers, keep the event running on time, and facilitate questions following a presentation. Select moderators with the same care used to select speakers. A good moderator is comfortable in front of a crowd and, perhaps most importantly, assertive enough to keep speakers on time. Usually, one moderator serves per topic area or session. Provide moderators with a brief biography of each speaker they will introduce and encourage them to read the bios ahead of time and confirm each speaker's name pronunciation. In addition, moderators should instruct speakers as needed on the proper use of the microphone and remote controls, and remind speakers to repeat all questions asked of them.

Typically, the moderator welcomes and briefly introduces each speaker. During each presentation, the moderator needs to be in position to clearly signal the speaker about remaining time. An effective signal is holding or waving a series of signs (5 minutes, 3 minutes, ONE minute, STOP) until the speaker acknowledges it. Another useful tool is to set up a monitor facing the speaker and use a simple count-down display to indicate how much time remains for the presentation (figure 5). If necessary, moderators

may need to speak assertively to the speaker. Immediately after the 1-minute warning, the moderator must begin moving toward the speaker; this technique is usually quite effective in getting the speaker to wind up the presentation. If necessary, the moderator may need to interrupt, ask the speaker to be available at the next break for any questions, and state that it is time to continue forward with the agenda.

Following the presentation, the moderator can call for questions if time allows, reminding the speaker to repeat any questions into the microphone so the whole audience knows what was asked. If time has expired, the moderator must resist the temptation to take “just one question” to be polite, but instead request that the audience meet with the speaker during the next break. Invariably, that “just one question” takes more time than expected and throws the schedule even further off.

Name Badges and Handouts

Upon arrival, attendees will seek a registration table where they can get their name badge and other event materials. Ensure good signage at the venue entrance to direct all participants to the registration table and meeting space(s). Online meeting supply companies



Figure 5. Keeping to the agenda schedule is important. One effective tool is a monitor with a countdown timer facing the speaker to notify him or her how much of the allotted time remains. (Photo by Diane L. Haase, 2016)

provide a variety of name badge sizes and styles. The name badge should be very easy to read. Ideally, the first name occupies a line by itself in a very large, bold font (easily visible, even from 5 ft [1.5 m] away), with the last name below it in slightly smaller font, and the affiliation and location in a still smaller font (figure 6). The purpose of the name badge is identification; it is not an advertising platform. Keep event logos or company icons to a minimum so the attendee's name is most prominent. Identify speakers, moderators, exhibitors, and sponsors on the name badge by using different colors, ribbons, or a banner of text. Name badge holders are available in pin-on, clip-on, and hanging formats. Everyone can wear the hanging name badges, whereas the pin-on tags can damage clothes and attire may not provide a suitable place for clip-on tags. At the end of the event, provide a box for people to recycle their name badge holders for use at a future event.

Many event attendees appreciate having a handout to follow during presentations and for future reference. One effective format is a paper copy of the speakers' presentations in a bound booklet. This requires obtaining the speakers' files 2 to 3 weeks before the event, which also helps ensure speakers are prepared for the event. Inevitably, most will make revisions after providing the file for the handouts, but the versions are usually similar enough for the audience to follow along. Remind speakers that the file will be used for the event's handout and encourage them to make figures legible when printed in black and white. To save paper and reduce bulk, ask the speakers to omit slides that have only photos (unless they are critical to the presentation and will print well), and make sure to print the slides 6-per-page and double-sided. Even with this format, enough room is available in the margins for taking

notes. Another option for a handout booklet, instead of printed presentations, is to include a 2- to 3-page summary from each speaker. Arrange the speakers' handout materials in the same order as the presentations in the agenda.

The handout booklet should start with the agenda, followed by the materials from each speaker, and include lists of speakers, attendees, and exhibitors along with their contact information, as well as maps of the venue area, field tour locations, and nearby points of interest. Number the pages and include a table of contents. Be sure to acknowledge any sponsors and individuals instrumental in making the event successful. Print more books than registered attendees to accommodate any walk-ins and attendees who want to take additional copies to their office. Multiple-day events will require even more additional books, because people will lose their books or leave them in their hotel room and will stop by the registration desk to pick up a copy for that day.

Optional Activities

Concurrent Sessions

Concurrent sessions are an attractive option for accommodating more speakers and topics. Two concurrent sessions, however, means more planning and resources, and twice the technical equipment, speakers, moderators, room rentals, etc. Three concurrent sessions requires three times the resources, and so on. Fewer concurrent sessions are better than more sessions. When offering concurrent sessions, attendees will only have an opportunity to hear half, or even less, of the speakers. If the event will genuinely be enhanced by featuring concurrent sessions, it is extremely important to keep the sessions exactly on time and provide adequate time between presentations for attendees to move to another session. Assertive moderators are absolutely critical to keep to the schedule. Ideally, hold concurrent sessions in the same building and provide attendees a very clear map to aid them in locating each session.

Panels and Open Discussions

Panels or discussion sessions are occasionally a valuable tool to cultivate interactive dialog among the event participants but they can be dismal failures if



Figure 6. Name badges should be easily read, even from afar, with the first name in a large, bold font followed by last name, affiliation, and location. Refrain from cluttering the tag with logos and conference names.

the audience participation is low, or if one or two people dominate the discussion. Panels operate best with 3 to 5 people from diverse backgrounds with knowledge of the topic and clear understanding of the expectations for the session. Select panelists with the same rigor as that used for speakers. Each panelist can give a brief introduction of his or her experience and perspective—but prevent introductory comments from becoming a full-blown presentation. After the brief introductions, open the floor to questions and comments from the audience. In a large venue, either strategically place stationary microphones or circulate people with microphones to ensure that everyone can be heard; if microphones are unavailable, remind the responding panelist to repeat the question.

Discussions and brainstorming can be a great method for problemsolving or determining future directions. Designate a note taker. While it may seem ideal to hold discussions at the end of the day, that may result in minimal participation because people are tired and many will likely leave early. For optimum results, hold these sessions during the peak of the event to capture people when they are most thoughtful, enthusiastic, and alert.

Field Tours

Field tours may be optional before or after the event with an additional fee, or may be included as part of the event. Either way, field tours require some important logistical planning but can greatly complement an indoor session. One good format is to have speaker presentations in the mornings followed by afternoon field tours. Another option is to have an all-day field tour on the second day of a 3-day event. Inform participants ahead of time regarding the possible activities, weather, and terrain so they can dress accordingly.

Transportation depends on the number of people, the route to the tour stop(s), and available parking. Carpooling saves money but is only effective for smaller groups with tour stops within a small radius of the starting point. Buses or vans can be rented. If using a bus, check the route in advance for adequate clearance, parking, and turnaround areas, and, immediately before the trip, check the route for construction or other situations that could cause disruption. With buses or vans, ensure that ample

bathroom facilities are available. If someone will present any information while enroute, make sure the bus is equipped with a microphone.

Avoid these two common, but unsuccessful, field tour formats: In the first, the tour guide gives a brief overview and then stays in one location endlessly entertaining questions, usually by just a few participants. Meanwhile, most of the group wanders bored and aimlessly, or clusters in groups to chat. In the second, the guide gives a brief overview then sends participants on a “self-guided tour.” This format works sometimes, but too often the participants are left on their own for too long and wander around waiting to leave or cluster in groups to chat rather than learning much from the tour stop.

A successful field tour has several informative stops and keeps participants engaged and active (figure 7). Provide participants concise handouts describing the key points of each stop. Make sure the person presenting information is selected well in advance and is prepared, enthusiastic, and perhaps even amplified with a microphone or bullhorn. At each stop, keep the group moving to sustain interest and provide a comprehensive overview of that particular location; this should be impressed upon everyone involved with planning and conducting the field tour. Make sure each stop has a definite visual reason to be included in the field tour (i.e., the visuals need to match the speaker’s message). A field tour with a few quality stops is best; too many stops can quickly get a field trip off schedule because attendees move slowly on and off buses. Build some wiggle room into the field tour schedule because these stops often take longer than expected. Attendees will never complain if the tour arrives back at the starting point ahead of schedule. Provide refreshments, particularly for trips during hot weather. Also, consider frequency and availability of restrooms, proximity to noisy equipment (including the buses) that could make hearing difficult, availability of shade or shelter depending on the weather, and accessibility for attendees.

Evening Activities

The most common evening activities are an ice-breaker registration the night before an event begins, a happy hour among the vendor exhibits, a dinner at the venue, or a catered dinner/happy hour at a nearby place of local/historical interest. An evening session is a great



Figure 7. The best field tour format keeps the participants moving and engaged. (Photo by Diane L. Haase, 2016)

opportunity for socializing and networking, giving out awards/recognitions, or holding a fundraiser (such as a silent auction). Additionally, it offers a perfect platform for a unique presentation or entertainment, such as music and dancing, interesting speakers telling of their ventures abroad, or someone from the local community talking about the history and lore of the area. The evening activity can be optional with an extra fee or can be built into the cost of the registration (with an extra fee for family members not attending the sessions). Be careful, however, to leave some free time during the event; attendees often want time for a private dinner with a colleague.

Posters and Exhibitors

Posters or vendor exhibits, either in the back of the room or in a separate area, are a great supplement to speaker presentations because they provide an opportunity for others to present information about research, projects, and products. Include a one-page abstract about each poster in the handout and the proceedings as well. Usually vendors are charged for booth space and therefore expect to be located in the main meeting room, an adjacent room where breaks occur, or in the public area near the registration desk.

Some events also include time in the agenda for each vendor to talk briefly (2 to 4 minutes) to the group about their product or service. Sessions with food and beverages specifically set to highlight the posters or the vendors encourage attendees to take time to view these features of the event.

Speaker and Participant Gifts

Speaker gifts are a nice gesture if the budget allows, but not a necessity. The same is true for attendees. While speaker gifts may be more substantial, attendee gifts are often printed with the event's logo or are representative of the local area, such as items donated by the local tourism agency or by local businesses. Imprinting logos takes time, so plan ahead. Consider the volume, weight, and character of the items, especially for speakers and attendees traveling by air—a good rule is to ensure that all gifts meet Transportation Security Administration requirements for carry-on items.

Raffles and Contests

Even if the moderators are doing a good job of keeping speakers on time, the event can be delayed if attendees are difficult to round up following breaks.

One effective strategy is to hold a raffle a few minutes before the end of each break. Provide each attendee with a raffle ticket at registration and require attendees to be present to win. (Note: raffle tickets must be free to avoid likely State licensing requirements.) If vendors provide prizes, they receive some advertising and the raffle does not add cost to the event. Another fun element to incorporate into an event is a contest. For example, a “seedling beauty contest” was held at a reforestation event.

Feedback

Whether or not you plan to host another event, obtaining feedback from attendees is always useful. Provide a form with the handouts. The form should be just one page and include questions to stimulate the best feedback such as: Which topics/speakers did you find most useful? Which topics/speakers do you wish had been included? Other comments? Ratings (e.g., scale of 1 to 5) for the venue, food, etc. can be used. Having moderators remind attendees a few times throughout the event increases the likelihood of people returning the forms. Some events now use online surveys; these services summarize responses, but the probability is low that attendees will remember to do this after the event.

Documentation

Assembling a group of expert speakers in one place at one time is often worthy of documentation beyond the event’s handout, depending on the level of effort and resources available. Documentation results in a compilation of timely and relevant information that will reach an audience beyond those who attended the event.

The most basic, and simplest, documentation is a hardcopy or USB flash drive of the speaker abstracts and presentation materials provided to all participants during registration. Speakers’ presentations, either just their PowerPoint® or perhaps video of the talk, can be posted at the event’s Website or on YouTube.

Additionally, and requiring more effort and resources, event organizers can request that speakers provide manuscripts for inclusion in published proceedings or a special issue of a professional journal. To accomplish this, it is critical to provide speakers

with a deadline months ahead of time and then be very persistent. Even so, half or more of the speakers will likely miss the deadline by a few weeks or a few months. (Build plenty of wiggle room into the timeline so stragglers can still be included in the publication.) Some may never submit a paper. Provide specific guidelines to the speakers regarding length and formatting. A proceedings editor (or two or three) should read through the manuscripts to check for typos, inconsistencies, grammar, or errors. If needed, the editor can work with each author to make necessary revisions. Printing and mailing the proceedings to each event participant needs to be included in the event’s budget (unless other funding is available or the proceedings will be distributed in another manner). Extra copies can be made available for sale and/or electronic copies posted online. Often, partnering with a government agency or university can facilitate printing and distributing proceedings. If manuscripts are expected to be of high caliber, an alternative is to work with an editor of a professional journal toward production of a special issue based on the event. Most journals require a review process that can improve papers significantly, give them greater credibility, and assist speakers with professional advancement.

Conclusions

Executing a “successful” meeting hinges on the audience having a positive perception of the event. The audience expects the event to run smoothly. Although unavoidable problems will likely arise, careful planning and attention to detail will help circumvent most minor and major pitfalls. Plan to be flexible during the event; remember that although you may be aware of meeting problems or issues, if the audience does not see or experience the problem, it is irrelevant. By following our tips toward executing a successful event (use the checklist in table 1), you should have a smoothly run, interesting, and informative event with maximum satisfaction and comfort for the organizers, speakers, and attendees.

Table 1. Check list for executing an exceptional event.

Exceptional Event Check List

Plan 6-18 months in advance

- Determine the event's objective and target audience
- Choose the event date(s), location, and venue
- Solicit suggestions for topics and speakers
- Delegate responsibilities

Venue

- Select an appropriate size for presentations and breaks
- Ensure comfortable seating and space to take notes
- Ensure adequate lighting
- Locate in close proximity to airport, accommodations, public transportation, and restaurants

Speakers

- Include speakers well-known for their expertise and/or presentation style
- Invite early to give adequate preparation time
- Decide whether or not to have a keynote
- Provide detailed guidelines, clear deadlines, and regular reminders

Agenda

- Arrange topics and speakers for maximum audience attention
- Schedule adequate breaks to allow for networking
- Provide assorted drinks and snacks during breaks
- Plan tasty meals with vegetarian, gluten-free, and healthy options; service must be timely

Budget and Advertising

- Advertise 3 to 4 months before the event—online, professional lists, registration brochure, etc.
- Set registration fees to ensure adequate revenue to cover fixed and variable expenses
- Consider waived or reduced fees for speakers, volunteers, and students
- Develop or hire a registration process that is reliable, accurate, and up-to-date

During the Event

- Provide each attendee with a legible name badge, event booklet, maps, etc.
- Have reliable technical equipment with back-up: laptop, wireless microphone, extra batteries
- Assign moderators to introduce speakers and keep on schedule

Optional Activities

- Carefully plan concurrent sessions, panels, and discussions must be carefully planned for optimum effectiveness
- Ensure field trips should have adequate transportation and engaging, interesting stops
- Provide evening banquets and presentations
- Offer presentations and/or vendor exhibits to enhance the event
- Supply speaker gifts, raffles, contests, and goodies for attendees
- Gather feedback from attendees to use for future events
- Post presentations online, publish proceedings, or ask speakers to submit papers for a special issue of a professional journal to have a broader impact