

What it Takes to Plan a Great Convention!

Many people feel that if you have a great program, top-notch speakers and fantastic venue, that you have all the necessary ingredients for a great Convention. These ingredients are definitely important, but in working as a planner for 20+ years, I have found there are some other powerful principals that should be in place to take your meeting to the "next level" and create a memorable and worthwhile event, for all those involved.

Build Relationships and Create a Team – Your success as a planner not only relies on your expertise, but also the expertise and relationships you have developed with your suppliers, speakers, program committee members, and other people working on the event. These relationships make your job easier, more enjoyable, and provides a solid foundation during the course of the planning process, on-site at the convention, and afterwards. Think of it as building a team with a common purpose and objective - to meet the professional, educational and at times personal expectations of the convention participants, and provide a worthwhile experience.

Relationships are built on trust, honesty, and effective sharing of information and communication. Keep this in mind as you ensure all the players involved are on the "same wave length". Keep them informed throughout the various stages leading up to and at the convention. Engage everyone, by asking for their advice, ideas, and getting them excited about the event and their contribution.

These valuable relationships that you build with people you work with can ensure a smooth-running event, help you through any rough spots, and contribute to the success of the convention.

Create a Learning, Interactive and Fun Environment – What have you done as a planner to ensure that you've created an optimum environment for the convention that is comfortable, thought-provoking, enlightening and meets the participants' objectives?

Are you clear what your client's or participant's needs and objectives are? Have you adequately briefed committee members, conference staff, speakers, and suppliers regarding the convention and its' purpose? Have you set aside the enough time in the convention programming for effective learning, interaction, and networking?

At times, meeting planners feel the more sessions offered during the convention, the more participants feel they are getting value for their money. Many times, I have seen program sessions that are booked "back to back", with little time scheduled for interaction, reflection, networking and well needed "break times". This can create a demanding and stressful environment, which may impede the learning process, and positive experience at the convention.

Convention participants value and learn not only from the speakers at the event, but also through the information exchanged between the participants – so be sure to allow enough time for this to evolve in the educational sessions, during breaks, lunch, and as part of your other convention activities.

We all know that we learn better when we are relaxed and having fun. Keep this in mind when you plan your next meeting or convention.

The Value Speakers Bring to the Table - Selecting the right speakers add to the success and tone of the convention. Speakers can “make or break” a program, so as a planner ensure you have the right fit.

When inviting the speaker, provide them with the important background information and convention history. In addition provide information on “make-up” of the participants, their level of expertise and education, and expectations. If the speaker isn’t “in-sync” with audience’s expectations and has little background information on the industry or program, then it can have a negative effect on the program and evaluations.

Since the speaker’s role is so key, it’s important to communicate with them on an ongoing basis right up to the event. Send speakers the program information, inform them of the marketing initiatives, speaker requirements and deadlines. Who knows, speakers may even assist you with marketing the program to some of their contacts. Regular program updates, are helpful, and touching base just before the convention to confirm any last minute details, answer questions, discuss arrival and departure plans, ensures speakers stay in the “loop”, and are informed and prepared for your event.

As a speaker, if the planner you are working with doesn’t provide background information, or keep in touch on a regular basis, I encourage you to initiate the process. This reflects your interest and professionalism.

It’s People That Make the Difference - Even if you have all the necessary ingredients, it’s the people that make the difference. Whether it’s the meeting planner, the people taking telephone registrations, the people greeting and checking in people in on-site, or the team working the convention – they all create that all important “first impression” which transmits to the delegates, speakers and guests. If everyone is informed, enthusiastic, and helpful, this sets a positive tone for the convention – and makes a major impact!

Abraham Lincoln, once stated “*People don’t care how much you know until they know you care*”. Think of this quote with all your dealings and interactions as a meeting planner. Remembering the needs of others and open communication, can make a huge difference in the success of your event!

Ingrid Norrish, President of Creative Meeting & Marketing Services, is a seasoned meeting planner, and provides marketing consulting services to speakers and trainers. She can be reached at (905) 456-0438, or visit her website at www.ingridnorrish.ca.