

ViewPoint

Association Trends



Linda E. Schwartz

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A Better Mousetrap: New Trends for 2012

There's no time like the present to try something new. If your group isn't ready for a big shakeup in 2012, consider making a few tweaks here and there that can improve the attendee experience, increase your efficiency, boost your bottom line or all three! Here are four simple yet effective strategies to help ring in the new.

A modern twist on the 'Speakers' Corner.' In 1872, an act of Parliament allowed a space in the northeastern corner of London's Hyde Park to be given over for public speaking. Nowadays, you may be able to find a little bit of the Speakers' Corner at certain annual conferences, including The American Society for Healthcare Engineering (ASHE) of the American Hospital Association's upcoming meeting in Phoenix, AZ, from March 4-7.

For the 2012 International Summit & Exhibition on Health Facility Planning, Design & Construction (2012 PDC Summit), ASHE is planning to feature an interactive ASHE Pavilion on the show floor where speakers can mingle with attendees and answer questions. A video host will conduct speaker interviews, with the completed 10- to 15-minute segments being immediately released via streaming media. ASHE is partnering with The Expo Group on the design of the Pavilion, which will include a social media lounge, cyber café, video/podcast studio and virtual streaming space.

If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. Or maybe not: Lewis

Carroll's Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* may have faced many obstacles, but she never had to negotiate a 325,000-sf exhibit hall! With 10,000 attendees plus 10,000 personnel from more than 500 exhibiting companies, the show floor is as populous as some small towns. Noting that most attendees now use smartphones, North American Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers (NAFEM) developed a mobile app for its 2011 The NAFEM Show, allowing attendees to search by exhibitor name, as well as by product category, for more than 2,000 products, from cheese knives to ice cream scoops.

The NAFEM Show floor also had eight designated "Wayfinder" stations where attendees could look up exhibitors and/or products using a touch-screen application and get directions to any exhibitor's booth. SmithBucklin Event Services Senior Manager Benjamin Rabe shares that NAFEM is enriching this app for the 2013 show. "The 2011 app was Web-based, so users needed to get a signal on the show floor to use it appropriately. For 2013, we plan to use a native app that attendees can download in advance of the show. Using this type of technology negates the worries about possible dead spots on the show floor and should lead to an even richer experience for attendees."

Can you cut off the crust? While no one goes to a conference just for the food, attendees are increasingly vocal about what they do and do not

find acceptable onsite. Hannah Baysden, Courtesy Associates senior coordinator, has seen a tremendous increase in the number of requests for special meals. "It is not just vegetarians or vegans driving this change," states Baysden, "but attendees who want gluten-free, peanut-free, low- or no-salt, sugar-free, low-fat and low-calorie choices. While you still see people choosing bagels and pastries for breakfast, you will find at least an equal number looking for fruit, yogurt and granola."

To avoid budget-busting F&B charges, Kate McCarthy, Courtesy Associates manager, recommends serving lunch family-style. "Hotels are open to lowering per-person meal costs when serving family-style since their staffing requirements are significantly decreased. The key is to choose a menu, down to the beverages and breads, that can be elegantly pre-set for attendees. We have gotten great feedback from both corporate and government clients who have noted more conversations at the tables. Another added benefit: There is less interruption from service staff when there is a speaker during lunch."

Another way to save, adds McCarthy, is to serve desserts at the afternoon break. "Most attendees won't miss dessert at lunchtime, but will be looking for a pick-up by mid-afternoon. Moving dessert to the afternoon lets you eliminate the snacks you would have purchased for the break."

So many venues, so little time. Site selection

is one of the most crucial, as well as most time-consuming, activities facing meeting planners. Increasingly tech-savvy attendees expect any convention facility to be Wi-Fi capable and to have fast, high-quality Internet connections at a low (or even no) cost. Additionally, preferred facilities will have state-of-the-art telecommunication services, as so many attendees rely on smartphone apps.

Keeping track of site features has become increasingly complex. To improve and streamline this process, SmithBucklin and Courtesy Associates partnered with Meeting Evolution to use its Web-based system in planning future client organization events. According to Baysden, "This system brings greater efficiency to RFP activities and allows us to track and compare a wealth of information for our associations. Instead of sending out 30 emails to different venues, we now send RFPs through one site. The hotels and convention centers send their responses back through the same site so we can easily and quickly access the data we need." Baysden further adds that, "Your history is maintained in the system, so you aren't starting from square one next year."

Linda E. Schwartz, senior director, marketing and communication services for SmithBucklin, an association management company headquartered in Chicago, has worked with associations and their members for more than 30 years to develop, implement and manage a broad range of membership programs.