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Make Your Conference a 365-Day Event

(Your members will
thank you!)

By Linda E. Schwartz and Kara Dress

For most associations, the annual conference is the organization's largest event — and also its largest asset. It isn't unusual for revenue from the annual conference to underwrite a number of ancillary programs that are vital to the organization's mission.

Despite the known value of the annual conference, only a fraction of most associations' members are able to attend. Whether you draw 10 percent of your membership or 50 percent, a significant portion of your constituency will never come to these events. Some cannot obtain the budget dollars to attend and find the costs are beyond their personal budgets. Others may find only a portion of the content relevant or determine they cannot afford the time away from the office. The result? A lose-lose proposition for both parties: The association loses revenue and the ability to reinforce its value proposition face-to-face, and the member loses the opportunity to gain knowledge and interact with peers.

Year-Round Benefits

The National Association Medical Staff Services, keenly aware of the travel and expense limitations faced by its members, decided to find a way to bring its conference to a larger percentage of its membership. NAMSS represents more than 4,500 U.S. medical services professionals responsible for medical staff

and credentialing in the diverse health care industry. Every fall, the organization holds an annual conference that draws approximately 1,000 attendees and consistently gets rave reviews. However, this leaves more than 3,500 constituents who are unable to benefit from this event.

As part of a long-term strategy for advancing the profession, Christine Murphy Peck, senior director, education and learning services, and her team worked to identify opportunities that would allow the organization to benefit from the annual conference throughout the year. Research initiatives supported the belief that the educational sessions at the annual conference were of high quality and could live on beyond the event.

"Our leadership team worked with subject matter experts to identify the current educational needs of the membership, and to then restructure content so sessions at future conferences would align with member needs," Peck says. "We then determined there were a number of ways to extend the life of the annual conference, from adding a

virtual conference to packaging content for recorded educational offerings to be marketed throughout the year."

The NAMSS marketing team, led by Kara Dress, senior manager, marketing and communication services, implemented the new strategy in conjunction with the 2010 annual conference Oct. 6-10, in Orlando. "Our goal was to extend the reach beyond the usual conference attendee and expand exposure of information to many staff members. Frequently, staff members take turns attending the conference, so NAMSS may reach only one staff member of several at each year's conference," Dress says. "We selected key sessions and offered them as a real-time virtual conference, available to members on either an individual or group basis."

Marketed as the NAMSS Virtual Conference, eight sessions (from 60 to 90 minutes each) were webcast throughout the annual conference. Virtual conference attendees could access the sessions on their own, or an office could purchase a group plug-in. In addition, they could select from a three-day, eight-session option (\$249 for members

and \$299 for nonmembers), or a one-day, two- to three-session option (\$125 for members and \$150 for nonmembers). The sessions were broadcast live, allowing virtual participants to hear the presentations, view the slides and join in the Q&A sessions with presenters through the online chat feature.

Virtual Enhances Live Event

In an effort to increase collaboration and expand community discussion around the educational content, NAMSS offered virtual attendees the option to share their sessions with a group. Attendees who viewed the virtual conference in a group setting at the same facility were able to earn valuable continuing education credits at a nominal cost (\$80 for the three-day option or \$30 for the one-day option). This allowed both large and small organizations to take advantage of the educational offerings through the NAMSS Virtual Conference.

NAMSS did not believe the addition of a virtual conference would dilute in-person attendance, and this proved to be the case. NAMSS knew that members preferred to attend the live event

and that the only reason a member would not attend was lack of funding. The virtual conference was marketed to all NAMSS members, with special outreach to past conference attendees (knowing it might not be "their turn" to attend the 2010 event), as well as members and certificants who were due to recertify and needed continuing education for the following year. As anticipated, the addition of the virtual conference did not decrease registrations for the live event, but added 350 participants, of which 130 were in a group setting. This resulted in an additional \$36,000 for NAMSS in 2010.

According to Dress, the success of the virtual conference expanded education on the pressing issues and concerns of today's medical services professionals. "Because conference attendance tends to trend on a rotating basis, with only one person in each facility participating every year, going virtual allowed NAMSS to offer education directly from the source, versus having people receive word-of-mouth training from one colleague who attended the event."

On-Demand Platform

The end of the conference did not end NAMSS' goal of making its meeting a 365-day event. Immediately upon returning from Orlando, Peck and her team began to "annualize" the conference's edu-

cational experience to an on-demand platform. NAMSS offered instant access to eight virtual conference sessions, all of which could be purchased individually. Each session included handouts from the presentation along with a continuing education quiz for \$49 for members and \$60 for nonmembers. If a member purchased all eight sessions and passed each quiz, he or she could earn up to 11.5 continuing education credits.

In addition, NAMSS bundled the more popular sessions into one DVD consisting of six sessions at \$135 for members and \$155 for nonmembers. The bundled six-pack of coordinating quizzes was available for an additional \$50 for members and \$125 for nonmembers. While the sessions could not be purchased individually, NAMSS included an option to purchase the quizzes individually at \$10 for members and \$25 for nonmembers.

"We consciously decided not to launch all recorded conference sessions at the same time," Dress says, "because we wanted to keep the excitement and momentum going and be able to announce new offerings throughout the year." New sessions were added quarterly and have been promoted regularly through NAMSS' monthly education e-newsletter and on its website.

NAMSS continues to enhance its education programs to offer valuable content to members throughout the year. As the cornerstone of NAMSS education, the annual conference remains an important part of learning for medical services professionals. By adjusting the format and delivery of information presented at the conference, NAMSS has expanded its reach to a wider audience of medical services professionals. ■

Linda E. Schwartz is senior director and Kara Dress is senior manager, both with the marketing and communications services division of SmithBucklin Corp. Schwartz may be reached at lschwartz@smithbucklin.com and Dress may be reached at kdress@smithbucklin.com.

