

THE CHALLENGE OF FAMILIARITY: HOW TO KEEP YOUR ANNUAL MEETING ENTICING

If your organization has an annual or even a biannual meeting, you know the challenge: year after year, you are asking the same people to devote their precious time to attending what they may view as virtually the same conference. How can you make sure that what you offer is exciting enough to keep them coming back for more, especially when the Internet offers them so many other opportunities for professional learning and communication?

- **Build A Reputation For Innovative Programming**

Your audience will certainly expect you to offer it cutting-edge content at your annual meeting. Keeping up with the latest developments before they appear elsewhere is one of the major reasons for attending.

You can also exceed your audience's expectations if you consistently offer them an innovative agenda design, sessions that go beyond the serviceable plenaries with a keynote speaker and the panels and breakouts offered everywhere.

For example, at one organization's National Conference, attendees were surprised to find a summons for jury duty in their registration packets for a trial set 10 years in the future. Participants at this kick-off event for the Conference found themselves in a highly charged forum that critically examined the issues involved in fulfilling the organization's mission. The trial engaged attendees intellectually and emotionally right from the start, propelling them into a state of heightened involvement throughout the Conference. This innovative agenda item is the sort of event that can only occur when people are in the same room.

- **Pick An Interesting Location**

Today, when it takes something special to motivate people to undertake air travel, consider adding interest to your annual meeting by varying the location. If you hold an urban meeting one year, you might want to consider a resort setting for the next. Off-season resort properties can be more affordable than you might think. Or if your audience seems to prefer one type of site, you can always entice by picking different geographic spots around the country, perhaps even going international to Canada, Mexico or beyond.

- **Tinker with the Little Things**

Sometimes changing what might seem to be an insignificant detail can have a positive impact on the atmosphere at a conference. At one meeting, the persistent custom was to wear formal business clothes for the first day when corporate sponsors attended. Dropping that requirement changed the dynamic, creating an unexpected atmosphere of intimacy and openness that contributed greatly to furthering communication among attendees. At another meeting, the usual sit down dinner was replaced with an international cuisine food station buffet and a variety of seating arrangements.

When you are faced with the daunting task of mounting an annual meeting, established routines provide you with welcome respite. Be careful though that your comfort with the familiar does not mean you miss out on the opportunity to energize the event. When everything stays the same year after year, you may be sending the message that this meeting offers nothing new and therefore, is not worth attending. By providing variety through meaningful innovation in areas such as agenda design, location selection, and the details, you can ensure your conference stays on the top of your audience's annual "don't miss" list.