Three Do's of Attendee Onboarding

By Samantha Whitehorne / Jan 24, 2019

Like new employees, first-time conference attendees will benefit from a smooth and successful onboarding experience. Some ideas for building an attendee onboarding strategy that will turn first-timers into long-timers.

I've had onboarding on my mind for the past few days for two reasons: one, because we have a new editor joining the *Associations Now* team next week, and two, because ASAE is in the process of implementing a new employee orientation and onboarding process—and our newbie will be one of the first to go through it.

As you know, how a new employee is treated and welcomed during those first days can make or break his or her experience. A smooth and well-thought-out onboarding experience will leave them feeling prepared and excited, while a poorly executed welcome is sure to give them pause and may even lead them to second-guess why they joined your team.

And for those of you planning and executing conferences, you should handle onboarding new attendees like you do new employees. The right strategy will not only make newbies feel welcome but also encourage them attend again next year.

What should your attendee onboarding strategy include? Here are three ideas to consider:

Assemble a new-attendee packet.

When new attendees register for your conference, be sure to have a new-attendee packet ready for them. You might include a letter from the CEO or conference chair thanking them for registering and telling them what they can expect as a first-time attendee, as well as a schedule of events that first-timers would most benefit from. Also important to share is contact information for someone they can reach out to with questions or concerns. This could be an association staffer or even a long-time attendee. And if your association offers a conference mentoring or buddy program, include sign-up details for that.

Build an army.

Velvet Chainsaw Consulting's e-book *Conference Connexity: Delivering on Your Networking Promise* introduces the idea of building an "Army of Connectors." This is a group of well-connected and well-known industry leaders and practitioners, people who first-time and next-gen attendees would likely want to meet.

According to Velvet Chainsaw, the Army of Connectors has four roles:

- Greet participants as they enter session rooms.

- Seek out new participants they've never met and get acquainted.

- Ask smart questions and listen intently to get to know participants better, particularly first-timers.

- Introduce participants to others in the room whom they'd most like to meet.

Create learning packs.

The idea here is to create small groups of around six to eight people, both new and seasoned attendees. They would be introduced before the meeting and then meet up at prearranged times throughout the conference to discuss what they learned.

Attendees will not only get to know each other, but they'll also have the chance to hear what they missed at sessions they were unable to attend. What I love about these ideas is that they shouldn't be too difficult or time-consuming to implement. Plus, the effort that does go into them is likely to produce happier and more loyal attendees.

What attendee onboarding strategy has your association found most successful? Please share in the comments.

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