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PEOPLE & PROCESSES

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Is Your Networking Working?

by Dave Lutz

One major advantage face-to-face meetings have over virtual events is improved networking results. It's up to you to crank up the networking opportunities and ensure that the connections participants make are of the highest quality.

It may seem a contradiction, but in today's so- cial-media-driven world, people want to be in each other's presence. They want to learn from their peers, ask questions, and network - live and in person. In a high-tech society, they crave high-touch connections.

Give them what they want. Here are 15 ways to provide more structured networking at your next conference or event.

1. Secure volunteer greeters and connectors for each session. Make sure that they are well connected and able to help spark networking as people enter.
2. Ask speakers to weave a networking activity into their sessions. It can be as simple as a group table exercise or a formal introduction to those seated nearby. Or as fun as having attendees meet three people in the room they don't know and greet them like long-lost relatives.
3. Staff expert bars. Take a page from Apple retail stores' Genius Bars, and secure industry veterans or influencers to be available in an appointed area to answer attendee questions.
4. Designate special sections in the hotel's restaurants for conference guests. Encourage the hotel to seat individual attendees with a group or another party of one from your conference.
5. Rope off special sections in meeting rooms for preferential seating. Distribute preferred seating cards to every third person entering the room.
6. Hold early-morning coffee klatches. Create casual social gatherings for coffee and conversations.
7. Design a Breakout Café. Attendees enter and write an intention - the idea they are struggling with - on their special badge. Secure volunteers with good facilitation skills to serve as "inno-waiters" to help stimulate and facilitate discussions.
8. Plan a table-storming session. Attendees pick a number as they enter and sit at that designated table, in groups of ten. Attendees state their challenges, and the group brainstorms solutions.
9. Schedule book clubs. Participants decide in advance which books they want to read, and discuss them on site with like-minded peers.
10. Program an "unmeeting" session. Attendees enter a room, put one issue they want to discuss on a sticky note, and post it on a board. Attendees separate into topic-based discussion groups.
11. Develop peer-to-peer roundtable discussions. Attendees enter a room where each table has a pre-established topic and a designated facilitator.
12. Create speed-networking sessions. Allot three-minute slots for attendees to meet one-on-one and exchange business cards. This works especially well for first-time attendees, when you add annual meeting veterans, speakers, and staff to the mix.
13. Add a team-building or community-service project to your agenda.
14. Give attendees name tents. They can help break the ice when sitting at tables during sessions and meal events.
15. Wherever possible, use meeting room setups that help encourage networking. (See p. 24 for examples of seating that sparks conversations.)



Take Away

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Adult White Space

The knowledge gap between attendees and speakers is shrinking. Today's attendees need more interactive learning and networking to get maximum value out of their conference participation. In order to facilitate networking, planners need to provide attendees with options to feel less rushed or crowded by the content, trade show, and receptions. To create more white space, we need to take things away and add opportunities for people to "stand in the margins" - to factor time in the schedule to reflect and connect with each other.

Dave Lutz, CMP, is managing director of Velvet Chainsaw Consulting, www.velvetchainsaw.com, a business-improvement consultant specializing in the meeting and event industry. His company assists organizations in realizing top- and bottom-line growth by delivering customer-focused solutions in business development, best practice and process improvement, strategic planning, and training.