

HARBOR HOUSE LAW PRESS, INC.

P. O. BOX 480
HARTFIELD, VIRGINIA 23071

(804) 758-8400
(800) 863-5348 fax
pwright@harborhousetlaw.com
www.harborhousetlaw.com

Conference Suggestions from Pete Wright

This list of suggestions will help you get your conference off to a fast start with early registrations and be sold out.

Ease of registration is one of the most important variables to create an early sell out of your conference.

Online Registration

We highly recommend that you have online registration, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Most conference hosts use EventBright (<https://www.eventbrite.com/>).

Having a website is critical. Many web hosts provide a “storefront/bank card” service for their domains. Debra can assist you in setting up online registration.

You should collect email addresses of attendees. Confirm that the registration was received and, with your confirmation email, note your refund policy. This will prevent problems later.

Fax Registration

You may want to have a 24-hour fax number so that the registration form can include the registrant's credit card information. We utilize “efax” (<https://www.efax.com/>) so that we receive all faxes as email on our computer. (We got rid of our fax machine years ago.)

Telephone Registration and Voicemail

Someone with knowledge about the conference details should answer a telephone during usual working hours. The telephone number should have a voice mail feature. Since many callers will have heard about the conference, have the phone number, but have not seen the webpage or conference brochure or registration form, your voicemail message should include information about accessing that information. You will have evening and weekend calls with specific questions. If the voicemail answers those questions, they will not leave a message.

The closer to the conference date, the greater the frequency of the incoming telephone calls.

Registration Fee - Reduced Rates

You may want to consider a reduced rate for early registrations received before the conference date, such as three weeks. Structure it so that early registration means actual receipt of the registration form and payment, rather than a promise that the check is in the mail or payment is forthcoming. For those “Early Bird” registrants, we provide an incentive – an adobe.pdf downloadable copy of our 2017 Year in Review book which contains the two U. S. Supreme Court cases issued that year, *Fry* and *Andrew F.*

You might want to consider a reduced rate for a mother and father, i.e., husband and wife team with one set of books. However, based on history experienced by other conference host organizations, you may have a (grand)mother and her daughter (the parent) or same sex couple registering under this provision. Determine in advance how you will handle this if you do offer a “couples” type of discount.

Seating - Classroom, Banquet, Auditorium?

I have held conferences in large auditoriums, churches where the seats were pews, and fancy conference centers where seating was either banquet style or classroom style.

Often the least expensive or reduced rate venue might be a large church, university, or hospital setting with auditorium/theater type of seats, preferably with a folding side table to use as a writing surface.

The attendees will be doing a lot of reading and highlighting in our books and writing notes in the margin. Some state bar associations require a writing surface as a condition of obtaining Continuing Legal Education CLE credits.

The banquet style is the best for promoting friendships, networking, and almost a sense of camaraderie. The attendees can eat their lunch at the same table all the while sharing experiences with each other. If a banquet style is used, you may want it structured so that chairs are not placed where the person's back will face the speaker.

Next to the auditorium/theater style, the classroom style provides the maximum number of seats for a given amount of floor space. Sometimes the tables are straight line and other times are in a "chevron" style. This might be dependent upon the location of the screen and whether it is placed in the wide edge of a rectangle or narrower end of the room. As you make arrangements with the host venue, you will want to visualize my location as I speak vis a vis the screen and location of the seats on the edges and what percentage are unusable.

I always position myself, from the audience's perspective, to the left of the screen. (Research on conferences and training events has shown that the speaker's position to the left of the screen is most beneficial.)

If the seating in a room maxes out at 350, then you do not want to set 350 as the maximum number of registrations you will accept. You will have many complaints of everyone feeling as if they are sardines, packed too closely. Probably set 90% as your maximum limit, however the conference location can guide you as to what is appropriate. The attendees will be seated in the same chair, same place, for about six hours.

Accessible

Your program should be accessible to persons with disabilities. Have a plan in place. Assume that the night before you might receive a telephone call that someone is deaf and needs a sign language interpreter. How will you deal with it? (In the past we have arranged for that person to sit in the front row center. It has not been a problem, but might be some day.) Your responsibility, given sufficient notice, is to respond to a reasonable request. Reasonable is a common sense definition. The standard of "reasonableness" for a conference of 400 versus 50 is not the same and timeliness of a notification 24 hours in advance versus several weeks in advance is a factor.

Lunch

It is much better if the registrants do not have to leave the area to eat. I do not recommend fancy gourmet lunches. With some venues, least expensive is the box lunch and with other venues, they might provide a buffet line as least expensive. The problem is that the buffet line takes time and, in my opinion, most successful is to have box lunches and drinks available as a part of the registration fee. Consider the use of a caterer who can provide a mix of ham, beef and turkey sandwiches and a few vegetarian box lunches so that you do not have to take any orders.

Exhibitors

Many of the conference organizations provide exhibitor space, for a fee. Dependent upon the dollar amount, some hosts credit the Exhibitor with several registrations/seats that the Exhibitor can use for their use or give to others.

With some of my conferences, the host has been able to sell so many exhibitor tables and "sponsorships" that the speaker fee, the book fee, the venue and the A/V fees were paid for so that the actual end cost to the host organization was significantly less. (Our <https://www.yellowpagesforkids.com/> website has listings in your state of many individuals and agencies and organizations who might want to either co-sponsor or become an exhibitor.)

Isabel, Gulf Coast's Katrina, TS Ophelia

Being able to contact the registrants easily and quickly in the event of a catastrophic event and postponement is critical. We suggest that your registration form require the registrant's daytime and evening telephone numbers and especially an email address. Be sure several members of your group have a printed list of all registrants and their contact information.

Many years ago Hurricane Isabel forced postponement of a training program in Northern Virginia, near Washington D.C. However, their registration list was housed on their computer at their Richmond, Virginia office. No one had a master printed list off site, nor was it located elsewhere, such as a "DropBox" file. Power was off to the office building for almost a week and no one could obtain access to the building nor turn on any computers.

The university where the conference was to be held was closed for days because of Isabel. They could not confirm whether the training would even be able to be held.

Many Virginia registrants were without power and could not leave their driveways and neighborhoods because of downed trees. Transportation was difficult and immediate needs were water, ice, and food.

The host organization decided to postpone the conference. They could not reach and notify the registrants since they could not get to their office and, even if there, could no power up their computers. (Attendee info was not on anyone's laptop at home.)

Public service radio and TV announcements about the postponement were made and we posted a notice on our website that the conference was postponed. Registrants from the greater DC, Maryland and Virginia area were aware that everything, everywhere, was cancelled or postponed. However we understand that some out of state registrants did show up that morning at the university for the conference.

Lesson learned. Keep both a print and computer copy of the registration list offsite with two different individuals. Have it accessible from home via a DropBox file or other means. You might be able to upload the computer file to your website in a password protected subdirectory. Had that been done, either the host organization or we could have sent an email to all registrants advising of the postponement.

At home in Deltaville VA, we can live "off the grid." We have a propane generator, 4,000 gallons of water tanks, and no trees adjacent to the house. We are used to long power outages - up to 3 weeks with Tropical Storms and Hurricanes in the fall and ice storms in the winter. We have several separate routes to access the Internet.

Subsequent Date Change

Once a contract is signed and you are ready to proceed, you might find that the xyz University or the 123 Hotel Conference Center or other facility can offer you a 50% discount if you simply move the date forward or back a day or two, or sometimes even a week or two. If that is the case, assuming that I do not have any other conflict, we will do our best to accommodate your changed date.

Testimonials

On our website under the Conference Marketing page, subheading of "Publicity and Registration" we tell the story about Steve and Staci. Read that information and then listen to the audio file of my interview about their marketing campaign. They sold out at 500, two weeks in advance of a conference which was scheduled on short notice.

In September 2012 we received a signed contract and deposit for a Wrightslaw conference from the San Diego chapter of the Autism Society of America. Our conference webpage for their February 1, 2013 conference and their online registration was posted within days. They set their maximum limit at 250 attendees. By the end of November, they only had 50 open slots left, so we modified our webpage to note "Only 50 slots left!" A week later we revised it to 20 slots and on December 17, 2013 they sold out, six weeks in advance! I complimented Natalie Hoxie and asked her to share with me some of her tips that caused a sell-out six weeks in advance.

She responded:

- Thanks for the compliment. Here are some things that I think may have made a difference:
- We got an online registration page set up and a mail in page done as soon as we had your contract and the venue contract signed.
- We put an ad in our local electronic newsletter and the ASA national newsletter with direct links to registration.
- I looked through your yellow pages in southern and northern California and emailed an information and registration link to everyone who looked like a parent advocacy organization.
- We connected with the Military Exceptional Family Program, Exceptional Family Resource Center who are hubs of information for military and families of individuals with disabilities in general and they posted the information in their monthly event calendars.
- We tried to create a buzz and sense of urgency well before the Christmas shopping season started so people could set the money aside.
- We created postcards and flyers about the event and provided copies for all parents at all of the local disability organizational meetings.
- In addition to the postcard campaign, most of what we did to promote was via electronic and social media.
- I also put flyers up at my local Starbucks. Every morning I came back, they were gone, and I put up more.
- Also, this I think is important as well; we got A LOT of inquiries about group discounts. We did not give group or couple discounts. We offered preferred group seating for every group that had 10 participants, provided they gave us the list of those registered participants 2 weeks before the conference. We reserved tables of 10 for 5 different groups with 10 registrants. One group paid for 10 slots without even having the names yet. (I think they got a grant to send 10 parents.)

SOLD OUT!

The conference page at your website and at Wrightslaw can be modified to reflect that you are “SOLD OUT!” if that happens. You will receive frantic last minute calls, faxes, and emails. Suggest that they send in a check and completed registration form with a clear notation in the Memo line of the check that this is for the “Conference Waiting List.” Have a clear email back to that individual to confirm that they SHOULD NOT show up unless notified of a cancellation. Explain that you will either return or destroy the check in the event that there is no space and they do not attend. Despite your email and verbal statements, some may show up anyway. Be prepared for that.

If sold out, send out a mass email to the registrants about ten days before, alerting them to the sold out status and reminder about your refund policy. If they are unable to attend, you might want to permit them to give their seat to someone else, so long as that person has a written note from the registrant to that effect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the conferences that typically sell out several weeks in advance of the conference date have online registration using a bank card, and permit online, voice, fax, and mailed registrations using a bank card and live telephone access. The time spent in enabling payment by bankcard, PayPal, or EventBrite will pay dividends the last few weeks before the conference. At that point, you want to focus on the last minute details, knowing that the conference has already become a success because it sold out!