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Conference Suggestions from Pete Wright

Below is a list of suggestions to help your conference get off to a fast start with early registrations and a sell-out crowd.

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, using PayPal (www.paypal.com) or a bank card feature.

Having a website is not critical, however if you have one, many web hosts provide a “storefront/bank card” service for their domains. If you do not have that ability, a number of our past conferences have utilized PayPal and Debra can assist you in setting up online registration.

You will want to collect email addresses of attendees. Ensure that you are able to confirm to a registrant that their registration was received and, with your confirmation email, note your refund policy. (This will prevent problems later.)

Fax Registration

You will want a 24-hour fax number so that the registration form can include the registrant's credit card information. We utilize “efax” (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 such as where, when, who, cost, and how to register. Calls will also come in the evening and weekend with a specific question about the conference that determines whether they will or will not attend. If the voicemail answered their question, they will not leave a message.

If the answer machine / voice mail is at an office, you will want to have remote access to be able to pick up and timely return telephone calls during the evening and weekends. Dependent upon the size of your group, you may want to rotate the telephone duty between several individuals.

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

Registration Fee - Reduced Rates

You will also want to consider a reduced rate for early registrations received before the conference date. Some have set a three-week deadline and others a two-month deadline. Structure it so that early registration means actual receipt of the registration form and payment, rather than a promise to you that the check is in the mail.

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.

For preferred group seating and early registrations, see Natalie’s comments below on the next page.

Seating - Classroom, Banquet, Auditorium?

I have held conferences in large auditoriums, churches where the seats were pews, and fancy conference centers where seating was 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. The drawback though is that the attendees will be doing a lot of reading and highlighting in our books and writing notes in the margin, so a writing surface is helpful, but not mandatory. (Some state bar associations require writing surface as a condition of obtaining Continuing Legal Education CLE credits.) (Many auditorium/theater styles do have seats with a side table that folds out of the way and also up and out in front of the seat.) Fewer seats can fit using the banquet style, and those latecomers who are seated at the banquet table with their back to the speaker will find it awkward. When the chairs are placed around the table I recommend that the table count of chairs be reduced by one or two chairs and not placed where the person’s back will face the speaker.

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.

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.

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. Have the caterer provide a mix such as ham, beef and turkey and a certain percentage of 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. With many that fee also the cost of several registrations/seats that the Exhibitor can use for their use or give to others. With some of my conferences, the

conference host organization was able to sell so many exhibitor tables and “sponsorships” that the speaker fee, the book fee, and the venue and A/V fees were paid for so that the actual end cost to the host organization was minimal or non-existent. (Our 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.)

Our Isabel and the Gulf Coast’s Katrina

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.

Several years ago Hurricane Isabel forced postponement of a northern Virginia conference. The host organization’s registration list was housed on their computer at their Richmond, Virginia office. No one had a master printed list off site. 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 that the conference would be permitted.

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, had no power to turn on the computers. 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. You might want 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, we can live “off the grid” since we have a propane generator, water tanks (4,000 gallons) and no trees adjacent to the house. We are used to long power outages - up to 3 weeks with Isabel and other Tropical Storms and Hurricanes in the fall and ice storms in the winter. We have several separate routes to access the Internet.)

One-Day v. Two-Days

On another note, if I have not already shared this with you, generally the number of attendees is almost twice as large for a one-day program as contrasted with a two-day program. It is a simple function of being able to take off more time from work or family. Often the turn out for a week day program is greater than a Saturday program because families have access to day care and are able to take time off work and still save the weekend for the family.

We recommend that first time Wrightslaw Conference organizers hold a single day event first and then perhaps six months, a year, or two years later, hold a two-day program if desired, or simply another one-day program. Another option is a one-day program focusing on just the law and then later, dependent upon demand and registrations for the first conference, another one-day program six months later that is a “Law and Advocacy” program rather than just the law.

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 that 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.
- We did a postcard campaign but I would say most of what we did to promote was via electronic and social media.
- I also put the postcards and flyers up at my local Starbucks and every morning I came back they were gone and I put a few more up.
- 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. What we did offer is preferred group seating for every group that had 10 participants coming, provided they gave us a list of those registered participants 2 weeks before the conference. We are reserving tables of 10 for 5 different groups who have 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 return the check to them 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 or PayPal 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!