

Community: the Conference Catalyst

Community is more than getting folks together. Literally translated the word means, “with unity.” When people settle in to work together with a common purpose and focus, you have a **community**.

When people make the choice to join an organization, pay money and travel to an event, they are looking for more than information. Information comes cheaply on the web, in books and periodicals. People come to events in the hope of improving their business performance through networking and relationship building. When this happens, enthusiasm is the result. Relationships develop. The bounty of the meeting goes far beyond speakers, books and tapes. It comes in hallway conversations, shared cups of coffee and late night chat sessions. Here the rewards are reaped. In these informal settings vital news is passed, job opportunities are brokered, and important relationships are forged.

Benefits of Building Community at Meetings

Participant benefits include:

- Exposure to more job opportunities
- Development of professional relationships with colleagues, increased knowledge sharing
- Increased exposure as a provider of products or services
- More fun, satisfaction and greater learning

Organizational benefits include:

- Increased loyalty and long term commitment
- Increased membership and member contribution
- Increased product sales
- **Community building** can be added to any meeting at little or no extra expense.

Techniques to Build Community at Your Meeting

Create opportunities for members to speak to the plenary. These are extremely valuable to participants, providing visibility, increasing everyone’s ability to network, and establishing a sense of ownership. These sessions can be short (as little as 30 seconds per person) and focused on the business at hand to ensure continuity. For best results use several sessions repeated throughout the conference. For example, 3 minutes in the morning, 3 minutes at lunch and 5 minutes at the close of the day

Provide ice breaking activities and weave them into the program. These activities add to the fun and give participants an easy introduction for networking. For example, include in the speakers’ intros a personal fact related to the theme of the conference. At an Innovation convention, each speaker could share their favorite invention. A game could be added in which participants match names of inventors with their invention. These simple devices give people something common, on target, to talk about and can have major impact, increasing the meeting’s performance and participants’ productivity.

Hold sessions that quickly introduce people to several others. Relationships cannot be forced on people, but the potential for quality interactions is increased when people meet each other. Simple quick introduction can be used in which participants are asked to meet four other people (perhaps sitting on either side, to the back and front) in a total of 5 minutes (30 seconds each intro, 1 minute to explain the exercise). These significantly increase participants’ ability to network.

Get speakers involved. Speakers are the role models at meetings. With minor changes, adding a sentence or two to their presentation, they can catapult your conference to a new level. Ask every speaker to endorse the value each participant brings and encourage people to meet each other.

Imagine your meeting as a high leverage learning event built on *community*. Your organization and the people who attend your meeting will be the beneficiaries.