



How to Engage Your **Event Attendees**

You spend a lot of time – and money – planning your association's events.

So naturally, you want them to be successful and for your attendees to be *engaged*.



But how? How do you make sure your attendees are having a good time and engaged in your sessions/activities?

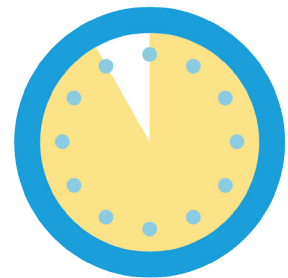
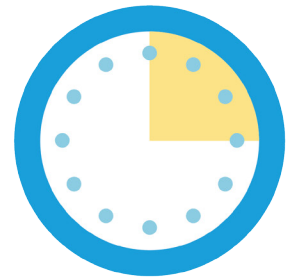
Here are a few tips:

Offer a variety of session formats

If your event is educational in nature (a conference, for example), you may want to consider playing around with session times *and* formats. People learn in different ways. Some are more hands-on learners, while others are more visual learners. Similarly, some people can soak up information for hours, while others prefer short, fast-paced segments.

In order to engage ALL of your attendees — regardless of learning style — make sure you're covering all your bases. Offer a variety of session formats — both in length and style — and have those running simultaneously, if you can. A 30-minute “quick hit” with one or two speakers. A one-hour panel discussion. A two-hour deep dive. This allows attendees to 1) choose what they want (so they can learn better), and 2) switch up what they're doing (so they don't get bored).

The more your attendees learn, the more value they'll get from your conference, and the more they'll want to attend next year. *Bingo.*



Be strategic about your room layouts

Room layouts can have a big impact on attendee engagement. But when choosing your room layouts, understand that it all depends on *how* you want your attendees to engage with you — in that moment. Different situations require different room layouts.

Below are a few examples of room layouts you may want to consider, based on your event/session goals:

- **Theatre style** (*Chairs lined up in rows facing one central speaker*):

This type of layout is great for general sessions and keynotes where excessive note-taking and discussion aren't really necessary.

- **Banquet style** (*Multiple round tables with seats around each table*):

This type of layout is good when speakers aren't the main focus. Banquet style is great for discussion-based sessions.

- **Classroom style** (*A series of rows or aisles facing, again, one central speaker*):

If you want a mix of theatre and banquet, you may want to consider a

classroom style layout. In this type of layout, attendees can easily see the speaker, but also break down into small groups (of about three or four people). Another advantage is that attendees have more space to take notes/use their computers.

So what are you trying to get out of each session? More importantly, what are your attendees trying to get out of each session? How you set up your rooms should be in line with *those* goals.

Utilize social media

Social media is a great way to engage attendees on-site.

To make sure everyone's sharing their messages in one place, so to speak, be sure to create an event hashtag. That way, not only can you see what other people are saying about your event (and respond to those messages), but your attendees can as well. (The hashtag can be as simple as the event name — or acronym — and the year. For example, the hashtag for the American Society of Association Executives' 2017 Great Ideas Conference was #Ideas17. Super simple — and easy to change year-after-year!)

Once you've identified a hashtag — and promoted that hashtag — you'll then want to post — a lot! To really engage your attendees, consider asking questions and conducting online polls. (Twitter now has a built-in polling feature, so this is extremely easy to do.) Ask your attendees what they're looking forward to the most, what topics they're most interested in learning about, what their favorite session has been so far, etc. Sometimes, the more direct you can be here, the better.

Another great social media tool to take advantage of: live streaming! (Facebook Live, Twitter Live, Instagram Live, etc.) This is a great way to engage not only your attendees, but people who couldn't attend as well. (And if they see how great the conference is going — how valuable the takeaways are, how much fun people are having, etc. — they might be more inclined to attend next year.)

Not sure what to live stream? Consider interviewing your speakers, before or after their sessions. Or pull aside a few attendees (with their permission, of course) and ask them how it's going/what they're learning. This doesn't have to be anything fancy. It just has to be valuable and engaging.

Schedule networking

If you want your attendees to engage, give them opportunities to engage. Networking opportunities, in particular. Even if it's just a 30-minute break for snacks and/or drinks, give people an excuse to gather/chat.

Now you know as well as we do that networking for many people can be tough. So make it easy on your attendees. Consider organizing a game, for example. You could create a Bingo sheet with qualities/characteristics/accomplishments in each box, and have your attendees go around and find someone who matches those qualities/characteristics/accomplishments. (For example “Has a dog” or “Has the CAE.”) This is a great way to get your attendees to network because you’re *giving* them something to talk about! (The winner could even get a discount on next year’s event!)



Incorporate games/contests

Speaking of games, if you're struggling to get your attendees to engage with vendors, this is a great tactic to use.

You could organize a scavenger hunt or a build-your-own-kit game where attendees have to go to different booths to retrieve different items.

Another option is to incorporate exhibitor-sponsored prizes. Here, you would have your attendees do something and then the winner would receive a prize from one of your exhibitors. For example, whoever uploads the most pictures to your event app gets a free trip from one of your CVBs. (This can be very enticing!)

If you're looking for something a little more unorthodox, you may want to play around (no pun intended) with jumbo games — giant Jenga, giant Connect Four, etc. You could place these on your trade show floor so that attendees would be playing amongst your vendor members. This gives your vendors and attendees something to talk about (and makes those conversations “lighter” — and less salesy).

One final idea here: Consider putting together a graffiti board where attendees can share ideas, takeaways, highlights from their year, etc. You could even ask a question. For example, “What’s your company’s biggest goal for 2017?” Not only is this a great way to engage attendees on-site, but you could then use that information to your organization’s advantage. Based on people’s responses, you could then create content or organize webinars to help your members (and prospects) achieve those goals.

Be mindful of your first-time attendees

At every event you host, you're *going* to have first-timers. And those first-timers may be a little intimidated — by the people, the sessions, the environment, etc.

Make them feel at home! Consider organizing a new member orientation, where you can engage your first-time attendees face-to-face and help them engage with others. (This is MUCH easier to do in smaller environments, like orientations and receptions.)

Another way to ensure your first-time attendees are engaged: Make it easy to identify your first-time attendees (by giving them a unique ribbon or sticker, for example). That way, if you ever see any of those people standing alone, you or a staff member or a volunteer can quickly approach them and *help* them get involved. One bad experience can prevent people from coming back, and this particularly applies to first-time attendees. That said, be mindful of your environment and treat those first-timers with care!



Coordinate off-site events

It's easy for engagement to plummet in the evenings — people are tired, they want to go explore (to see the host city), they want to go back to their room and catch up on work, etc. But give them alternatives — alternatives they won't want to turn down.

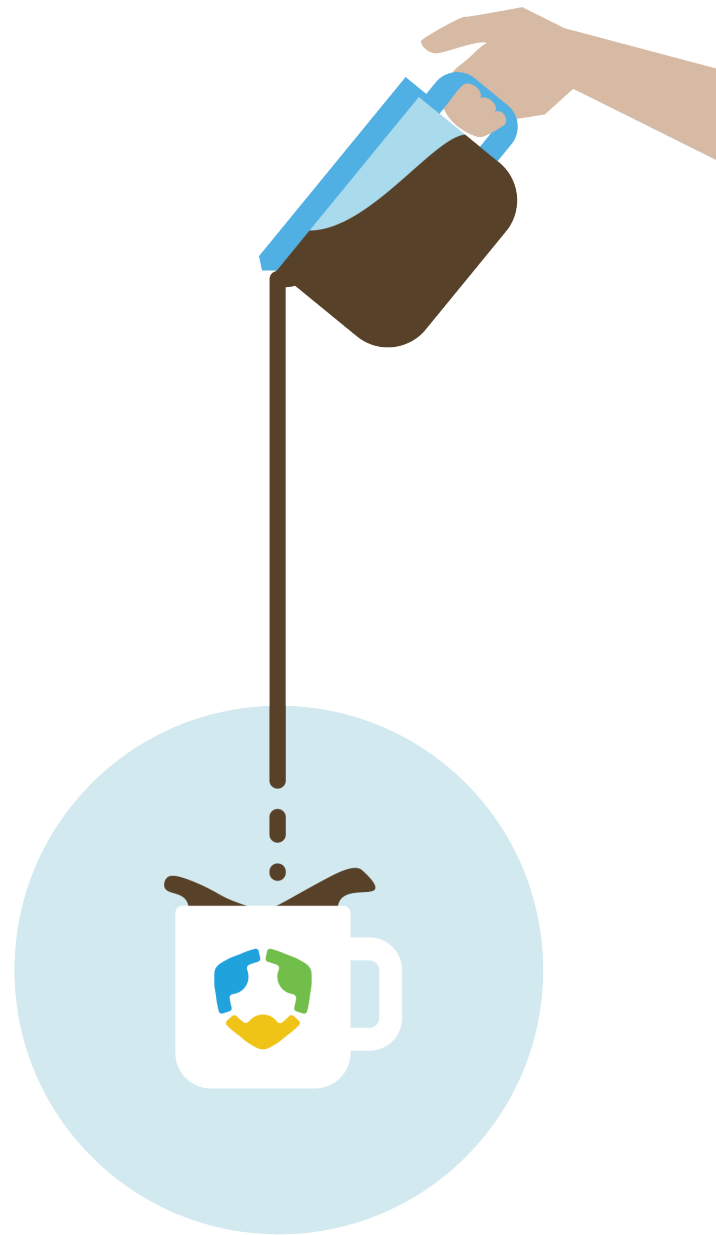
If possible, try coordinating happy hours, sightseeing tours, local food tastings, etc. These fun activities will keep people engaged even in the afternoons/evenings. (Note: You may have to charge for these, but that could be a good source of non-dues revenue!)



Create a comfortable environment

If your event spans over a couple of days, your attendees are likely to get tired. And when people get tired, they're more inclined to leave (at least for a couple of hours).

To prevent that from happening, provide your attendees with a comfortable environment (one they won't want to leave or *need* to leave). Try incorporating lounge furniture, coffee stations, charging stations, etc. You may even want to have a quiet room where attendees can check their email, rest, and regroup. (Tip: We've actually seen associations provide massages in their quiet rooms — for a one or two hour period — and this seems to go over REALLY well. Just something to consider!)



Post-event engagement tactics

Just because your event ends doesn't mean the engagement has to! Here are a few tips to keep that post-event excitement and chatter going:

1

Relive best moments

Every event has highlights, and those highlights are worth re-living — especially in picture/video form. Start by posting a photo album on Facebook. Then, choose some of your favorites from that album and post one-off pictures on Twitter and Instagram. You could even incorporate some of the big weekly hashtags, like #ThrowbackThursday (#TBT) or #FlashbackFriday (#FBF) — to make your posts relevant and maximize exposure.

If you were able to take any video clips during your event, try splicing those together to form a short highlight reel. Not only is this great for boosting

post-event engagement, but it's a great way to promote your event NEXT year (*if it's an annual thing*).

Once your pictures and videos are up, let your members (and attendees, especially) know. Not all of your attendees may follow you on social media, so send them a follow-up email (your organization's newsletter, even) with a link to the photo album/video(s). This reminds attendees of how much fun they had AND encourages your non-attendee members to hopefully register next year!

2 Post key takeaways (on your blog and in your newsletter)

Again, this depends on the type of event you had, but if it was educational in nature, consider posting key takeaways on your blog and/or in your organization's newsletter. These could be specific ("X Things We Learned at [Name of Conference]") or pretty high level ("X Trends We Noticed at [Name of Conference]"). Either way though, by providing this type of content, you're keeping the conversation going *and* showcasing the value of your event/association.

Note: This may go without saying, but be sure to provide your attendees with the presentation slides following the event as well. This adds value to their overall experience (plus, it allows them to check out some of the sessions they may have missed on-site).

3 Help attendees apply what they learned

So often, attendees go home and get so wrapped up in their day-to-day lives (especially playing catch-up at work), they forget how to implement what they learned (and why that's important). Help them out! If you can, consider sending your attendees a post-conference checklist with takeaways and tactics *from* your various educational sessions.

Another option (one that would take a little more time, but be INCREDIBLY valuable) is to offer one-on-one post-conference training (in person or via phone). You could actually talk to your members and help them apply the tactics/takeaways they learned. This, again, could be a GREAT non-dues revenue opportunity.

Event planning is tough — but it's SO worth it. It's a great source of revenue AND a great way to engage your members face-to-face (while providing them with value).

Now let's say you have the on-site part of event planning down (the engagement part), but you're struggling with the planning — and logistics in particular. Allow us to help! Check out our free guide to association event planning! It's filled with best practices for before, during, and after your next event!

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