



The Art of excelling[↗] at Association Events

HOW TO HOLD AN ASSOCIATION EVENT THAT DELIVERS

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Viaduct Events Centre, Auckland

Kia Ora, Welcome

It's an exciting, albeit challenging time for association professionals. New technology and venue options have empowered conference organisers like never before.

At the same time, Tourism New Zealand's Business Events team understand that a new generation of attendees are demanding more from events, including unique experiences, healthy meeting spaces and ground-breaking content. And of course, as ever, association budgets remain tight, meaning organisers must be nimble and creative and deliver more with less in what is arguably their most important initiative.

This comprehensive, 32-page guide is packed full of research as well as advice from thought leaders to help association professionals ensure that they are creating an event that will engage, educate and provide networking opportunities for members. Some of the topics covered include:

- Why conferences are critical for associations to both survive and thrive
- How to develop content that appeals to all of your potential delegates
- How to set the ticket price to maximise attendance and deliver value
- How to select a Professional Conference Organiser and ensure the best return on your investment
- How to attract sponsorship and demonstrate tangible value to sponsors involved with your event
- The latest technology trends and the tech advancements that will truly enhance your event
- How to select a destination for your event that reflects your brand and appeals to delegates
- How to assess more creative venues against traditional venues
- Case studies also help to underline the importance of getting your event right.

In an increasingly competitive market, our hope is that these insights will put you and your association one step ahead in organising events that inspire, educate and entertain. And we hope that if you are planning a conference, you'll consider New Zealand/Aotearoa as your next destination.

Ngā Mihi / Best regards



Lisa Gardiner
Tourism New Zealand
International Business Events
and Premium Manager



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The essential event

Conferences aim to engage and stimulate – but they also need to make a profit. Here’s why the bottom line needs to stay top of mind.

A good conference offers associations crucial pathways to engage, educate and network with their members. This not only keeps current members feeling valued, but word-of-mouth may attract new members, too.

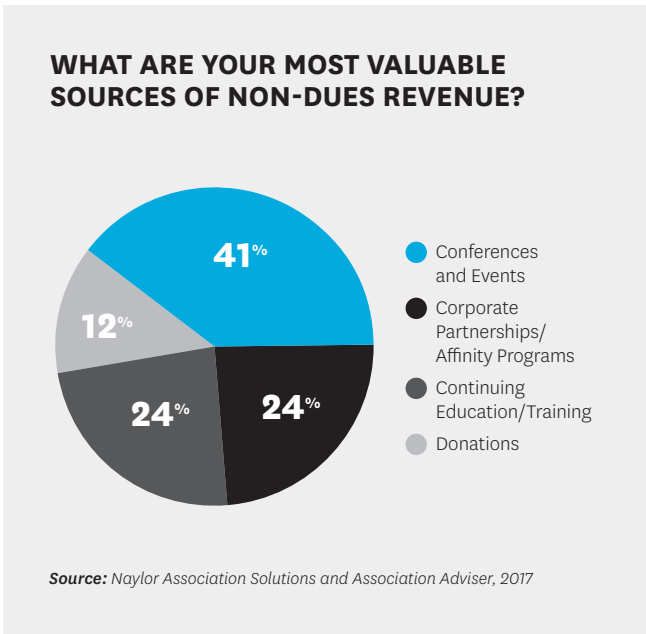
But an event’s importance as a revenue source has often been understated or neglected, and, in an increasingly competitive world, where membership numbers are often stagnant and sometimes dwindling, associations need to embrace a mindset where profit is as important as engagement.

A typical association gets one-third of its income from membership dues, one-third from ongoing partnerships or sponsorships and one-third from its annual – or biennial – conference, according to Brett Jeffery, New Zealand General Manager of the Australasian Society of Association Executives (AuSAE).

There are some variations to the formula – associations whose revenue primarily comes from ongoing partnerships, for example, may be able to weather a loss – but for the majority of associations, conference profit is crucial.

A recent survey by Association Adviser, a publication for association professionals in the US, found conferences and events were the most valuable source of revenue for associations outside membership dues, making up more than 40 per cent of income.

In its 2017 *Economic Impact on Associations Report*, McKinley Advisors found that generating non-dues revenue was the top priority for associations surveyed in the US, overtaking membership as the primary area of focus for the first time in the history of the study.



Adopting a business mindset is now crucial for an association’s survival, and must be embraced not just for conferences, but operations across the board, say experts.

“Some associations say, ‘We’re a not-for-profit so we shouldn’t make money’, but they need to show organisational sustainability,” Jeffery explains. “They can’t afford to run at a loss as they won’t be here in 10 years’ time. A lot of associations are now realising that and they’re stepping up their game and seeing that they need to run as a business.”



RETAINING AND GROWING MEMBERSHIP

The McKinley report found that while non-dues revenue is now the top priority for associations, as indicated by 26 per cent of respondents, it is closely followed by new member acquisition (24 per cent) and improving member retention (23 per cent).

Conferences – and other events – are intrinsically linked to membership, as they are a key way for associations to both retain and grow their base. Members are more likely to stay if they feel connected and “plugged in” to their association and more are likely to join through positive word of mouth.

Associations Forum General Manager John Peacock says events are at the heart of associations because they give members an opportunity to associate with one another face to face.

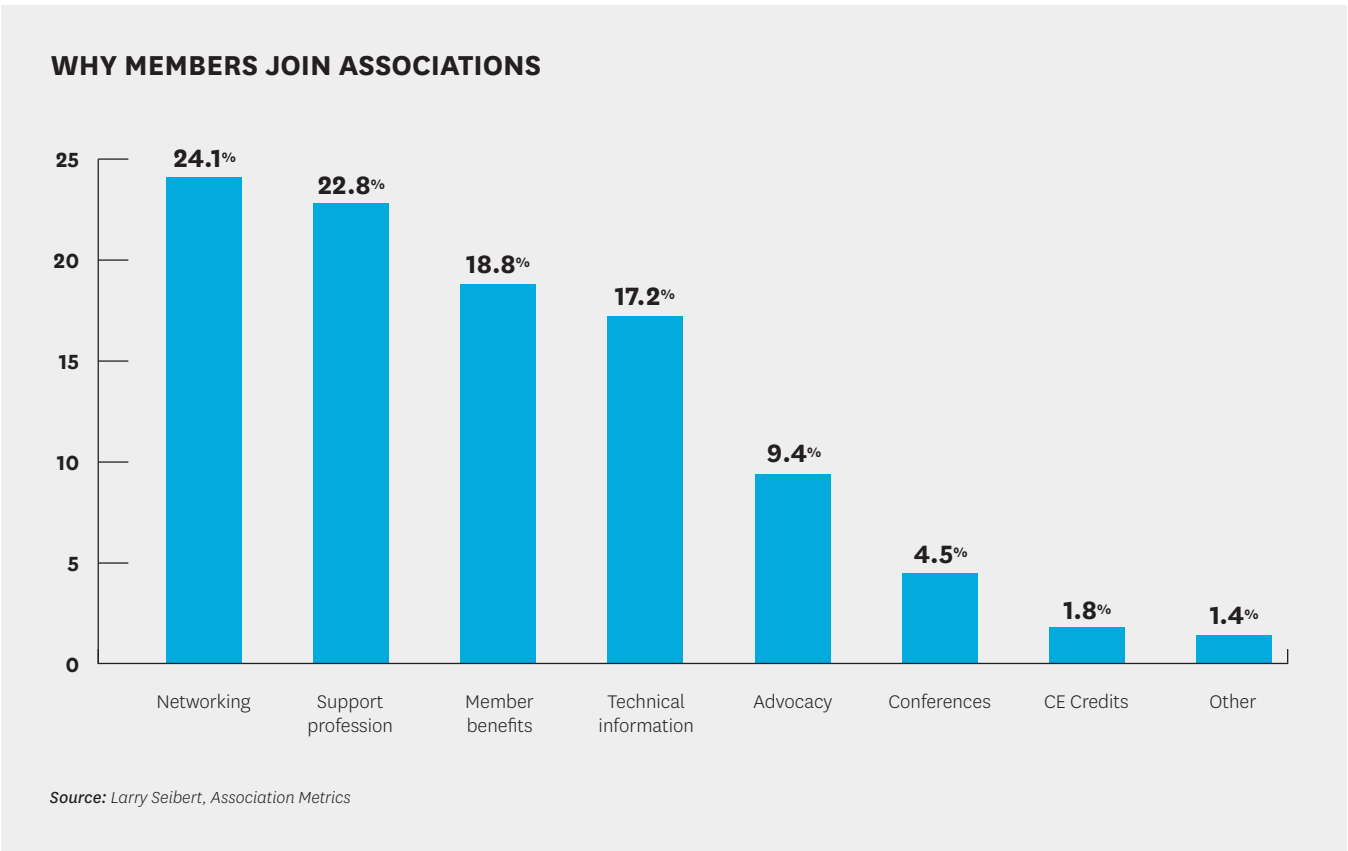
“People join associations to learn from each other and this is often from conferences and educational activities,” he says. “Conferences are the flagship activity of most associations so it’s crucial to get them right and, hence, to continue to build the reputation of the association.”

Associations getting their conference package right are being rewarded with rising delegate numbers, says Jeffery, but those facing declining attendance need to innovate to provide better value and to draw greater crowds.

And associations need to connect beyond the conference, thinking of ways to engage with members throughout the year.

“It’s the whole package more than anything else,” Jeffery says, adding that if an association is struggling with its conference, the whole organisation may need to change. “They need to increase the value proposition to enhance membership engagement, and part of that engagement is the conference.”

“Some associations say, ‘We’re a not-for-profit so we shouldn’t make money’, but they need to show organisational sustainability. A lot are now realising that and are stepping up their game” – Brett Jeffery, AuSAE





Queenstown

Breaking with tradition

Associations must break with tradition and embrace innovation in the conference space if they're to remain relevant.

Many associations see no reason to depart from the "way they have always done things". But change is increasingly important to stay ahead of competitors – one of the greatest challenges for associations.

FACING THE COMPETITION

In its 2017 *Economic Impact on Associations Report*, McKinley Advisors found that increasing competition was one of the most prevalent concerns among associations in the US.

Associations were more worried about competition than in previous studies, with 73 per cent of respondents reporting this was an issue, a 31 per cent increase from 2016. They were also increasingly concerned about sponsorship (a 21 per cent increase) and membership retention (13 per cent increase), with the latter being the biggest perceived challenge.

The picture is similar closer to home, too: research conducted by the Australasian Society of Association Executives in March 2017 also found that competition was the biggest external challenge for its members.

CONSIDERING THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, HOW CONCERNED ARE YOU WITH THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?

1

Membership retention

78%

2

Competition

73%

3

Member recruitment

72%

4

Sponsorship

67%

5

Attendance at other education seminars

57%

6

Annual meeting attendance

52%

Source: McKinley Advisors 2017 Economic Impact on Associations Report

THE TOP CHALLENGES

Research conducted by the Australasian Society of Association Executives in March 2017 found:

The top five internal challenges for associations were:

- Insufficient budget
- Lack of membership growth
- Difficulty in communicating value to the membership
- Member retention
- Insufficient staff

The top five external challenges were:

- Other associations/organisations competing in the same profession/industry
- Perception of the organisation in the marketplace
- Keeping pace with new and emerging technologies
- Declining membership budgets
- Awareness of the organisation's brand

In the face of that evidence, associations clearly need to differentiate themselves from the competition, and Lidia Dalton of Expert Events says this differentiation should be a focus in conference planning.

"There are a lot of conferences out there, and many people travel around the world multiple times a year to go to them," she says.

"That's where there's a need to do something different – something that will engage people and get them interested."

Interestingly, the McKinley report found annual meeting attendance was of less concern than issues such as membership retention and recruitment and competition, which could indicate a lack of understanding among associations that these factors are closely correlated.

HOW TO STAY RELEVANT

Not surprisingly, churning out the same conference in the same venue with the same speakers year in year out is not the way to win friends and influence members. Innovation is key and the payoff is multi-fold: beginning with increased audience numbers and profits, but reaching as far as strengthening membership.

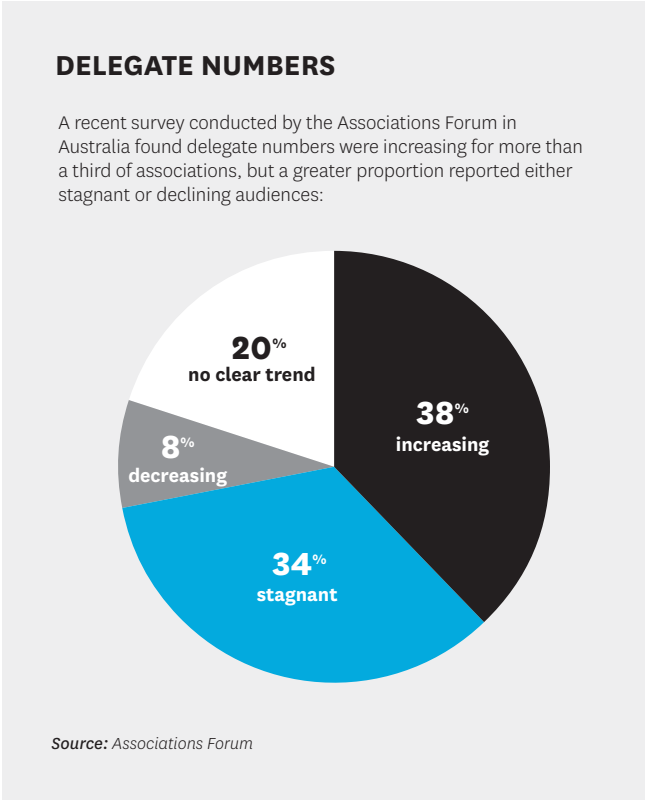
"A conference needs to change 10 per cent every year," says Brett Jeffery, New Zealand General Manager of the Australasian Society of Association Executives. "A lot of associations haven't changed in 20 years."

Originality, freshness, creativity – all are essential in broadening the appeal of a conference, which is vital against the backdrop of challenges around declining audiences and association membership.

“A conference needs to change 10 per cent every year. A lot of associations haven't changed in 20 years” – Brett Jeffery, AuSAE

Challenges for associations

As the McKinley report found, membership retention is the biggest concern for associations in the US, with 78 per cent of respondents indicating it was of increasing concern (membership recruitment is not far behind at 72 per cent). Lack of membership growth was also identified as a key challenge for associations in research conducted by the Australasian Society of Association Executives last year.



Barry Neame, President of the Professional Conference Organisers Association, stresses that remaining relevant, particularly to younger people, is crucial.

“Many associations have delivered their conferences in the same way and in the same format year after year,” he says. “Now we’ve got a whole Y Generation who are looking for something different.

“They don’t necessarily need a conference for their networking opportunities or for professional development because they can create that through LinkedIn, Facebook or other social media platforms.”

Rather, he says, they’re coming to conferences to engage in a discussion and be part of a community.

Appealing to Millennials but not alienating Generation X and even Baby Boomers is a tricky balance, Dalton says. “The demographics that a conference is targeting can vary greatly, and trying to get something everyone will engage in is quite challenging, especially when it comes to technology.

“We have conference apps, for example, but the take-up will vary depending on what the conference is and who is attending.”

INNOVATION ON A BUDGET

Since associations generally have smaller budgets than corporates, financial constraints also impact the conference sphere.

Insufficient budgets were identified as the biggest internal challenge for associations in research conducted by the Australasian Society of Association Executives last year. *The American Express 2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast* also found that the overall global spend on meetings this year was expected to remain relatively flat.

“Associations have to think about not just breaking even but making money to keep staff employed, while giving members value and keeping bums on seats,” says Brett Jeffery. “It’s a tough job.”

Associations Forum General Manager John Peacock agrees. “Associations need to continually provide relevant and fresh content, and to impress at every opportunity,” he says. “They can be conservative at times and they need to ensure there is energy and a buzz at their conferences.”

Given budget constraints, it’s important to prioritise and to ask the important questions – what is essential?



Viaduct Events Centre, Auckland

“Associations can be conservative at times and need to ensure there is energy and a buzz at their conferences”

– John Peacock, Associations Forum

What can be cut back? Is expensive technology really worth the spend?

Australian Marketing and Event Professional Jaylene Young’s advice is to continuously keep an eye out for ways to innovate on a budget. “For example,” she says, “I’ve found bands at an event I’ve been to and they’ve given me a discount simply because I booked them then and there.”

She also suggests trawling Facebook and Instagram to find smaller local businesses keen to expand their client lists.

“Their prices are generally lower than the top-ranking options on Google for things like cupcakes, cakes, event styling, furniture hire or handmade gifts or crafts.”

Young also says that although smaller groups are unlikely to be able to afford big-name speakers, they can still create interest around the presenters they can attract. “If you have an ace team on the communications side promoting the event, they can focus on the key points of their speakers’ presentations and what attendees will take away from the session.”

Kate Mather of South Coast Experiences says a smaller budget can provide an opportunity to offer something different or an element of surprise because organisers need to think outside the box.

“It may be offering some activities around the set conference time; a coastal or rainforest walk with a guide offering photography skills and tips throughout it, then a group photo,” she says. “This, for example, could help an IT department who have to create content for social media.”

Whatever the approach, innovative, interesting and engaging content is at the absolute core of a good conference, not only drawing audiences in but ensuring that they’re impressed enough to come back for more.

Te Puia, Rotorua

Audience-led planning

Delegates of all types and ages are tired of the usual conference format, and arguably are demanding more from an event than ever before. To capture the widest audiences, associations must consider a multitude of factors in unison, including content, networking, technology and wellness, and provide them all in an enticing location.

CATER FOR ALL THE GENERATIONS

Creating a conference that caters to all age groups is one of the great challenges for event organisers. How do you engage a social-media savvy Millennial without alienating a Baby Boomer who's been on the job for 30-plus years?

It's a delicate balancing act, but it can be done.

Millennials are the largest growing sector in the workplace – it's predicted that by 2025, they will make up 75 per cent of the global workforce. Raised on technology and highly fluent in social media, their needs differ from other delegates.

Dan Schawbel, Author of *Promote Yourself: The New Rules for Career Success*, says that 85 per cent of Millennials want something that is personalised, new and enables them to meet the right people at the right time. "The best conferences are layering technology on top of the event with a mobile site, with social network sharing and with games," he writes. "This way, attendees and exhibitors/sponsors

are more engaged with the event, and it becomes a form of entertainment, not just learning, for them."

It's not just Millennials who want an experience though; attendees are spoilt for choice when it comes to conferences, so they want something that differs from the usual format to pique their interest. And many event organisers are responding.

According to Skift.com, one of the megatrends of 2017 was the "festivalisation" of meetings and events, whereby conference organisers developed more multidisciplinary programming that pulls from both the business and creative industries, writes Greg Oates.

The idea is to drive higher engagement, says Oates, by tapping into both the professional and personal interests of attendees. "The formula behind these events is generally the same: pull together the most inspiring minds in business, tech, media, science, education, art, and culture inside a cross-section of colorful venues and collaborative spaces.

Then hit 'blend' with integrated online and offline catalysts, virtual and augmented reality experiences, start-up pitch competitions, live music performances and art exhibits, and local offsite experiences to create spontaneous collisions between participants in unprecedented ways."

CONSIDER CONTENT

Of course, it's vital for associations to incorporate content that is valuable to both participants and sponsors.

But what content is the right content? Speakers are an important component. But, says Brett Jeffery, New Zealand General Manager of the Australasian Society of Association Executives, while they're an attraction, people don't attend a conference simply to listen to a keynote speaker.

The educational aspect is equally important. It must be relevant to the industry, insightful, and about new initiatives or the "latest and greatest".

There is also increasing diversity in conference content, with more interactive sessions such as forums, workshops, round-table discussions and hands-on activities.

"The recent focus on meeting design has led to an array of formats and presentation styles," says Jan Tonkin, President of the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO). "Co-creation, where the audience has an active role in setting the agenda for discussion, is a case in point. Small-group discussions are more and more popular, as are workshops and masterclasses."

People no longer want to be lectured to from 9am to 5pm, says Barry Neame, President of the Professional Conference Organisers Association. Rather, they want to engage and be included in interactive discussions in a group setting. "From what I've seen over the past five or ten years, that's where people are really starting to get engaged," he says.

An innovative way to present content and get attendees involved is through graphic recording or graphic facilitation, which can help to create excitement and energy and improve engagement.

Graphic recording is used to create a graphic record of your meeting, while graphic facilitation uses words and pictures to create large-scale imagery of a conversation, which stimulates interaction and supports productive conversations and thinking.

Early research into graphic facilitation in a paper called *Explicit Group Memory* by Geoff Ball found that a shared picture supported group learning and helped leave a lasting impression – or memory – on the group.

ASSOCIATION EVENTS ATTENDANCE

There are three main reasons people go to association events, particularly conferences:



Content



Continuing professional development or education



Networking

Source: Brett Jeffery, New Zealand General Manager of the Australasian Society of Association Executives

What audiences want

PROVIDE NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Networking is another huge drawcard for delegates. And there are plenty of innovations happening in this sector, including a move away from big sit-down dinners to networking functions, where attendees establish pods to meet over drinks or food, and then move to the next pod if they want a change of discussion.

“The formula behind these events is generally the same: pull together the most inspiring minds in business, tech, media, science, education, art and culture inside a cross-section of colorful venues and collaborative spaces” – Greg Oates

“People are getting more experience by being able to move around these different groups,” Neame says. “They don’t need to go to a conference dinner where they sit with 10 people at one table for four to five hours and they can’t engage in a discussion about a range of different things.”

Jeffery says one of the main things younger delegates want is to engage with industry leaders or speakers. Rather than

hiding or huddling with senior association members during breaks, the speakers should be available to talk to delegates.

Attention should also be paid to the layout of the room, which can facilitate greater interaction and networking. Using couches, chairs, coffee or bar tables and ottomans – known as a “lounge zone” – is an excellent way to facilitate informal conversations.

THE ROAD TO WELLNESS

According to the *American Express 2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast*, wellness is an emerging trend in the conference sphere. It will form part of enhancing the attendee experience, and will “shape meetings and events”, notes the report.

As part of the trend towards creating “healthy” meeting spaces, the MGM Grand in Las Vegas has opened a suite of meeting rooms with features including:

- Circadian light (enhancing productivity, energy and experience)
- Purified air (reduces allergens, toxins, smoke and microbes from the air)
- Aromatherapy (creates a relaxing, mood-enhancing environment)
- Biophilia (to create a calming atmosphere)
- Healthy menu options (approved by nutritionists)

The rooms were designed with support from wellness advocate Deepak Chopra and nutritional direction was provided by the Cleveland Clinic, with the intention,



THE MILLENNIAL FACTOR

Trying to attract more Millennials to your events? Here’s what you’ll need to offer...

				
Distinct experiences	Live polling	Active participation	Networking opportunities	Social media integration
Meeting planners should become experience architects that deliver a strong emotional message to their participants	73% of Millennials are interested in being part of live polls during event sessions	Instead of passively listening to a speaker for an hour, Millennials would use the majority of the presentation time for Q&A	86% of Millennials want career networking and job opportunities from events	Millennials view experiences at live events as valuable content to be shared with their online followers
Source: Dan Schawbel’s White Paper for the American Program Bureau, “How Millennials See Meetings Differently”				

“People don’t attend a conference simply to listen to a keynote speaker. The educational aspect is equally important”

– Brett Jeffery, AuSAE

according to MGM Grand, of enhancing “the wellness of attendees and promote a more productive meeting”.

There is also a general push towards giving delegates more breaks at conferences, so they can have personal time as well as being able to move around, and providing healthy or “brain” food to keep attendees alert.

LISTEN TO YOUR MEMBERS

There isn’t a one-size-fits-all for what audiences want, so associations should listen to members and ask what’s important says Neame. This might involve an evaluation, such as a comprehensive survey, at the end of each conference.

You can also track delegates’ movements during a conference via radio-frequency identification (RFID) and beacon technology (connected to badges) to see what they’re engaging with.

While this can be helpful in providing insights, there are privacy issues and the right steps must be taken to ensure delegates are informed when this technology is being used.

THE ESSENTIALS

Since content is king for conferences, this is where associations should be focusing their budget, with cuts made elsewhere.

Steven Turner, Director of Anagram Events Australia, advises not to skimp on programme quality, food or social events, including networking functions, as these are important to delegates. But the unnecessary “bits and pieces” can be discarded.

Turner Recommends:

- Forgoing luxuries such as a speakers’ prep room which may cost thousands of dollars and is completely unnecessary
- Avoid fancy exhibition booths and create something simple that looks equally as good. “For one conference that wanted a champagne-style conference on a beer budget, we just used a trestle table, a power board and a backing board for \$100 each and it looked fantastic”
- Only printing what you absolutely need to
- Not hiring a professional photographer, but asking a conference attendee with a passion for photography, or requesting that delegates post photos on social media
- Paying only for drinks consumed rather than providing a drinks package
- No longer supplying delegate bags with items delegates don’t need
- Utilising volunteer or student staffing (which also adds value by educating the next generation of members)

Trending now: technology to enhance your event

Event technology is increasingly focused on achieving “cut-through” with audiences. What are the latest trends?

The basics of event technology – a screen and projector on which to display PowerPoint – are still standard, but advances are being made all the time. From touch screens and event apps to augmented and virtual reality and artificial intelligence, there’s no shortage of new technology. But which tools are the most effective?

Enhancing engagement and experience

New technology is changing the way people design and think about their events, according to Andrew MacColl, Director of Event Technology at Staging Connections ANZPAC.

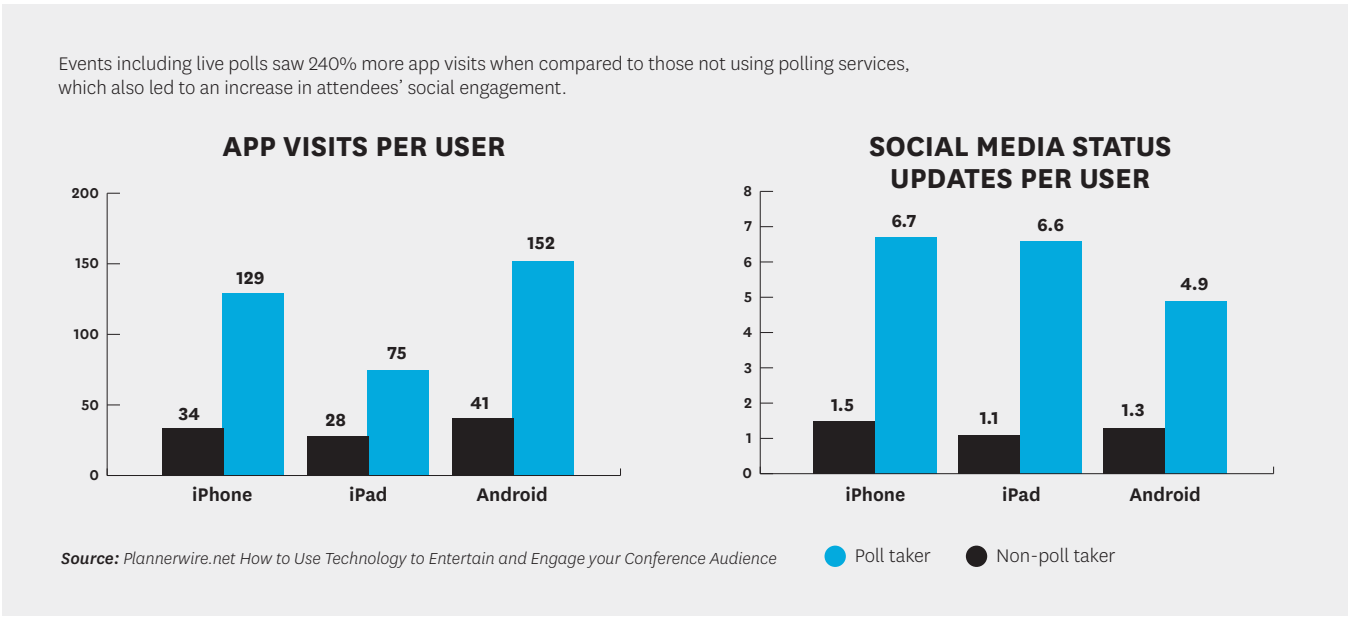
He says event organisers are increasingly looking to achieve better cut-through with audiences to improve the attendee experience, and technology helps by providing engaging tools. “Event organisers are looking for technologies that create a dialogue or conversation with attendees rather than just bombarding them with PowerPoint content, which is more passive,” he says. “Engagement tools also provide the

ability to capture important attendee data to innovate and improve the experience.”

So which new tools improve engagement?

MacColl says some of the more basic technologies organisers are using include:

- **Event apps** for content distribution, which make it easier to navigate the venue and schedule sessions (but they need to be easy-to-use and appropriate for the event)
- **Audience response systems** for dialogue, insights and post-event feedback, or live online polling, which has been shown to increase both app visits and social media engagement
- **Social media** to create a buzz, to get an event to “trend”
- **Live streaming** to reach wider audiences; the content can be made available to anyone on the internet, creating a bigger remote attendance
- **SpeakUp**, a fun, soft, throwable microphone that allows people to ask questions and interact



Numerous surveys conducted in recent years have found that more than half of event planners are using event apps, and there’s an expectation from event attendees that they’ll be available.

Second-screen technology is another tool that can also be useful for events, says MacColl. It’s a system whereby delegates have a copy of the presenter’s content streamed onto their phone, tablet or laptop. Organisers can also use it to find out which content most interested the audience.

Touch screens are often used at events, especially to help people navigate, and MacColl believes that eventually this technology will be able to recognise individual attendees’ badges and direct them to sessions.

Gesture control, which provides the ability to interact with your content using gestures, is another technology gaining traction. According to Staging Connections, it was recently used at a conference for a major paint company, with the speaker “waving a paint brush” over before and after photos on a screen to create a dramatic effect and “never-before-seen experience”, compared to simply clicking on the next slide in a PowerPoint presentation.

Other technologies include interactive presentation software (content can be stored and accessed within one presentation), drones (for video and excitement), and augmented and virtual reality (AR and VR).

Future trends

Live streaming is tipped to be one of the big trends of 2018, according to Eventbrite. It’s used to reach audiences beyond the event – especially through sharing on social media and crowd streaming.

Event organisers can provide access to part or all of the conference online to reach wider audiences that may see the content and decide to come along next year. Research from Livestream.com has found that 30 per cent of those who view a live stream video decide to attend in person the following year.

Live streaming can be offered as a free way to “trial” the conference to build future delegate numbers or it can provide an additional revenue stream by charging for access. It can also provide revenue by facilitating advertising opportunities for sponsors.



Other technology trends predicted to gain momentum in the events space this year include:

- **Facial recognition** to measure the mood of attendees for feedback. It will also help with check-in and security, according to Eventbrite
- **Artificial intelligence** software that can deliver a more personalised experience via chatbots (programmes which can answer questions such as “What’s on next?” and “How do I get to room 10?”)
- **RFID (radio-frequency identification)** to upgrade sponsorship experiences as they can gather more data
- **Measuring engagement and attendee behaviours** through technology including gamification, live streaming tools, and RFID or Beacon technology. Beacons, which are small objects emitting Bluetooth signals to smartphones, can be placed around venues to enhance the attendee experience through engagement, as well as to record attendee behaviour for organisers. Some of their uses include welcoming attendees, providing directions and networking

The reality of AR and VR

Virtual Reality is a computer-generated, three-dimensional virtual or artificial environment that can be explored through a headset. Augmented Reality imposes virtual elements as an overlay to the physical world.

Both are still developing and promise huge possibilities in events, including opportunities for people around the world to attend live events such as concerts or sports fixtures from the comfort of their home – or anywhere – with Facebook launching Oculus Venues in 2018 as just one example.

So far, its usage at events has been limited. Tim Chapman, the General Manager for Digital Event Services at Staging Connections, says he has not yet seen VR used successfully in conferences. He believes the only real use for it so far is in exhibitions.

This means that regardless of budget and resource constraints, AR and VR may not yet be a realistic option for the conference component for all events.

“For associations that have an adjoining exhibition, VR can be used for experiences and product demonstrations. But outside of that it’s too complicated,” Chapman says. “It generally only works in a one-on-one or small group environment.”

But MacColl says the use of VR is expanding in event planning because it enables organisers to visualise the venue environment.

And while VR is used increasingly to allow people to attend live events from anywhere in the world, MacColl says live streaming for remote attendance is a better option for associations wanting to reach outside audiences.



Technology that won't break the bank

How associations on a budget can use affordable technology to enhance their delegates' conference experience.

All businesses need to keep abreast of technological advancements – and conference organisers are no different.

“Technology is now an integral part of any conference, particularly given the way in which it facilitates connections and engagement,” says Jan Tonkin, President of the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO).

Technology is expected to continue to transform meetings and events, according to the *American Express 2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast*.

“In 2018, we expect that technology will continue to make an impact on the overall end-to-end management of the delivery of meetings and events, and also on the attendee experience perspective,” the report says.

“The ongoing evolution of mobile apps and hybrid meeting solutions, combined with the potential applications for newer technologies ... have exciting implications for meeting owners and attendees alike.

“Modern attendees expect an online experience will be available to enhance their face-to-face experience and are eager to deploy technologies that facilitate personal event attendance goals, such as networking and interacting more deeply with content.”

But which technologies are essential? And how does budget impact your choices?

GET THE BASICS RIGHT

Before you consider technology, it's essential to create a programme that will hook members' interest. Once they're at the conference, it's all about providing a rich experience, says Andrew MacColl, Staging Connections ANZPAC Director of Event Technology. The buzzword here is “engagement”, he says, which will ensure the experience is worthwhile for delegates. And technology will certainly help.

At the most basic level, it's crucial to get the sound right. It might be something you take for granted, says MacColl, but it can go wrong and if the audio is poor, audiences will be instantly disengaged.

PowerPoint is perfect for speaker presentations – but used in moderation, he says. “You don't want to have too much of it.”

Beyond the basics, MacColl suggests adding engagement tools to create energy and get attendees involved. “Find out who you're talking to and take them on a journey,” he advises. “Don't make it a one-way thing where someone is doing all the talking. Have a level of engagement, and technological tools are the key to that.

“For example, use a different kind of media to open the session, such as a video for sensory engagement.”

Engagement via technology is particularly appealing





to younger generations. Barry Neame, President of The Professional Conference Organisers Association, says technology is increasingly being used to make young people feel more comfortable in forums or open discussion sessions.

“Some young people feel intimidated by the more mature members of the association. Introduce things like live polling or voting with Twitter feeds, so questions can be asked to the person on the panel or the chair and the young person doesn't have to stand up and ask,” he says.

BEYOND THE BASICS

Andrew MacColl's Staging Connections colleague Tim Chapman says low-budget conferences should consider using new engagement technologies such as apps and an audience response system.

Here's his advice on four:

-  **An event app** is especially beneficial for conferences of more than 500 people (and some AV companies offer it for free)
-  **An audience response system** will help to break the ice. It's used to ask the audience questions and manage Q&As, which can encourage engagement, is beneficial for a post-event survey and is excellent for capturing data
-  **Social media** has many applications, including promoting events when top industry professionals post about their conference experience. It influences their followers, Chapman says, and it's great for user content and exposure before, during and after the event. “You can start to create a community of avid followers, which assists marketing for next year's event”
-  **Live streaming** is ideal for reaching an audience outside those attending the conference, says Chapman, and the event content can be broadcast via social channels. It's also great for capturing data. The other major benefit is that it can be an alternative revenue stream if you charge sponsors for advertising. Chapman says one of the biggest missed opportunities with live streaming is in fact advertising and sponsorship. “Event organisers could offer sponsors 15-second slots before the live-stream starts when there's essentially a captive audience”

SEARCH FOR SAVINGS

How do you do all of that and keep to budget? Some technologies, such as event apps, can cost thousands of dollars if you source them yourself, but they're often part of a package offered by audio-visual companies.

Steven Turner, Anagram Events Australia Director, says there is a plethora of software available for free.

Turner says he uses free resources for graphic design and to develop event websites. He suggests scaling-down event websites for smartphones or tablets rather than using an event app.

“The tools are there, you just need to understand what's out there and how to use it,” he says.

To use more event technology on a small budget, Event Manager Blog suggests trying some of these ideas:

- Negotiate with the venue, or ask how you can reduce the tech spend
- Buy your own equipment
- Become an affiliate. If you bring on clients who use the tech of a software company, for example, you can get part of the fee back
- Compromise on something else. Cut back on other areas to increase your technology spend
- Ask your AV company for advice
- Sponsorship. If your technology vendor wants to get in front of your audience, they might provide something for free, or at a cheaper rate
- Use technology that makes a big impression, but isn't necessarily the most expensive

“Technology is now an integral part of any conference, particularly given the way in which it facilitates connections and engagement” – Jan Tonkin, IAPCO



Choosing the right speaker

Why a really great speaker will add immeasurably to a conference.

Of all the factors that coalesce to form a great conference, nothing is as important as content – and who delivers that content, and how, is absolutely key.

As former speaker and event organiser Malcolm McLeod puts it: “A great speaker, presenter or facilitator in an average location is better than an average speaker in a dazzling location.”

Forget location, location, location. “Too many companies and associations waste money on fancy-looking venues,” says McLeod. “For the long-term success of your event, it’s more important to have relevant content that will be remembered and acted upon.”

And forget the old-fashioned concept of a speaker standing on a stage talking at their audience, innovative delivery is now one of the cornerstones of engaging audiences.

MONEY TALKS

The cost of a professional speaker ranges broadly from AUD\$3000 to AUD\$20,000. While some associations can afford a professional or big-name speaker, or are able to get their sponsors to pay, others simply don’t have the funds.

So, how can associations with limited budgets still find speakers who are going to engage, stimulate and even occasionally infuriate their membership? (What better way to add drama to a session than a little controversy?)

One is to source up-and-coming talent. Younger speakers often want the experience and opportunity so will offer a good rate, says Kate Mather of South Coast Experiences. She suggests contacting speaker representatives, searching the internet or using social media – including LinkedIn – to contact them directly, which will save you the representative’s fee. “TEDx can also have speakers in training,” Mather adds.

“A great speaker in an average location is better than an average speaker in a dazzling location” – Malcolm McLeod

If you’re contacting speakers directly, don’t be scared to ask for a cheaper price or a recommendation of someone who may fit your budget, says McLeod.

Marketing, communications and event professional Jaylene Young suggests doing lots of “Googling, YouTubing and stalking... and by stalking I also mean check out other conferences and who their speakers are.” Search relevant topics for your conference with “speaker, presenter or trainer” added, she advises, and watch show reels of their previous presentations.

Technology can help allay costs, too. Conference organiser Lidia Dalton of Expert Events says that rather than bringing overseas speakers to your location, record their presentation or use live-streaming. The former is the safer option, as there’s less chance of something going wrong, but the latter is more engaging for the audience, she says.

If your budget doesn’t stretch to any of the above, consider using talent from within your organisation or membership. Barry Neame, President of the Professional Conference Organisers Association, says associations can often find people within their membership who make excellent presenters.

“You’ll usually find members who have great skill sets and are very good orators and very good at delivering key messages,” he says. “So you don’t necessarily need to go to the big-time speakers on the circuit to achieve the right sort of outcomes.”

MAINTAINING THE MESSAGE

When selecting speakers, it’s important to think about the content they will provide and how they will deliver it, as well as whether it will resonate with your audience and be engaging enough to leave an impression.

Think outside the square. A speaker versed in the topical issues of your relevant industry is all well and good, but don’t be afraid to broaden the scope to include other issues that impact your members: like a lifestyle guru talking on work-life balance.

A speaker should be inspiring, challenging and educating in an entertaining way that’s appropriate for the audience, says McLeod.

“A good speaker should move or inspire your audience to take action on new behaviours or actions related to the event themes. If you want a message to stick and inspire new

FORMATS THAT ENCOURAGE GREATER ENGAGEMENT



Flipped learning

Attendees access the speaker’s content before arriving, so the session becomes about the “application of the material”



The long table

A few select speakers sit at a long table with microphones, like a panel, and audience members who want to contribute can join the table, like a dinner party



Debate

This gets members involved without making them have a formal speaking role



Gamification

This involves turning content into games in order to teach



Experiential learning

Providing hands-on activities to create interaction and make learning memorable

Source: PCMA Convene magazine, June 2017

“A good speaker should move or inspire your audience to take action on new behaviours”

– Malcolm McLeod

behaviours with upgraded skills, a speaker should cover three to five main points in 45 to 90 minutes. Any more is information overload and dilutes the potency of the delivered message.”

Speakers can provide keynote presentations or facilitate more interactive discussions, such as forums, says Neame.

Keynote presentations can set the scene for the conference around its theme, including challenges for the sector, future projections or even how social media can be integrated into your operations.

In comparison, forums require a speaker to open with a short (about five-minute) talk followed by a longer interaction with the audience, including fielding questions, to facilitate a discussion.

Their initial presentation is often deliberately challenging to encourage discussion and engage delegates, says Neame, and this engagement is increasingly preferable to delegates, rather than being lectured to.



THE NEW BEAT

Think right outside the box by bringing in music and performance.

Both can be more powerful than words, especially if you want to encourage teamwork among attendees.

Take Australian group African Beat. They have performed at conferences for many associations, as well as for corporates including Deloitte, banks and mining companies.

It’s a unique offering, says African Beat Director Kim Thomas, as awareness around music as an alternative to speakers is still in its infancy.

“If you have a low budget and just a few minutes available, we can get toes tapping, hands clapping and build teams through the original musical instrument – the human body,” she says.

“Making music together unites people and is an effective ice-breaker.”

According to Event Manager Blog, art – including music – is one of several “potentially brilliant” alternatives for events and conferences. “Why not have music or dance tell a story?” writes author Jan-Jaap In der Maur. “Why not prove a point or offer an experience by acting? It works in the theatre, the cinema or the rock concert. So why shouldn’t it on the conference stage?

“You can put professional dancers, actors or musicians on stage, or have the delegates engage in these activities.”



Te Papa, Wellington

Best-laid plans: why organisations are using professional planners

Outsourcing event planning is a growing trend in the conferencing industry – but what are the advantages, and how do you find an organiser who’s right for your association?

According to Professional Conference Organiser (PCO) Lidia Dalton of Expert Events, the work involved in organising a conference can often be significantly underestimated. It’s a complicated process, and even for those who have the expertise and knowledge it can be hard work.

In fact, event management has consistently been named as one of the most stressful careers. In a 2018 survey by US and Canada job site CareerCast, event co-ordinator came in as the fifth most stressful job for the third consecutive year, behind military personnel, fire fighters, airline pilots and police officers.

So it’s no surprise that organisations, including associations, are increasingly looking to outsource event planning. A 2015 survey by US association management company

SmithBucklin found 81 per cent of senior association executives outsource at least some core business functions, including meetings and events. Nineteen per cent of respondents said they outsource trade show management and 13 per cent said they outsource event strategy or management. A further 11 per cent and 5 per cent respectively were thinking about outsourcing these in the future, with only membership technology outranking event strategy or management for future outsourcing.

Leslie Thornton, Vice-President of SmithBucklin Outsourced Services, says the outsourcing trend isn’t surprising. “Association managers are recognising the need to bring new, innovative ideas to their meeting space to help increase attendance, attract sponsors, and drive attendee and member engagement both at the event and year-round.”

THE SELECTION CRITERIA

A good PCO can minimise risk for events, saving an association time and money. But how do you find a PCO – and how can you be sure they’ll do a great job and fit with your association and its goals?

One of the first steps is to research their credentials. John Peacock, General Manager of Associations Forum, says it’s particularly important to determine if a potential PCO has experience relevant to your association.

“PCOs need to understand the sometimes-complex decision-making processes of associations and also to be convincing when offering suggestions for improvements,” he says.

Jan Tonkin, President of IAPCO, says it’s also necessary to consider a PCO’s experience with conferences of a similar size, their affiliation to professional organisations, their regional experience or coverage, and the number of years they’ve been in business.

“The PCO you select will be the one who most clearly matches your requirements and with whom you feel you will be able to work in partnership,” she says.

You must ask the right questions – and get the right answers – before choosing a PCO, including:

- What will the total fee be? Are there fees in addition to the management fee?
- What payment installments are required before the conference?
- What commission is taken from service providers or suppliers?
- Who will hold the non-membership database? Will I have access to it after the conference?
- How can I innovate on a budget?

PCOs charge in different ways, says Brett Jeffery, New Zealand General Manager of the Australasian Society of Association Executives, so it’s essential to assess what their total fee will be. Some charge a management fee or take a cut from every exhibitor or delegate, or both. Some even offer to profit share, he says.

Dalton agrees that it’s essential to be clear about how

“The PCO you select will be the one who most clearly matches your requirements and with whom you feel you will be able to work in partnership” – Jan Tonkin, IAPCO

the PCO charges, including determining whether there are any mark-ups, rebates or commission they receive from suppliers.

“Some might act on behalf of the client and forward original copies of invoices from suppliers directly to the client, while others pay it themselves and then on-charge the cost to client. Be clear on how that works,” she says.

“Often a PCO can negotiate better rates with venues and suppliers due to their buying power, experience and understanding of how conferences work”

– Lidia Dalton, Expert Events

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

What are the advantages of using a PCO? They take care of issues less experienced organisers may not consider, such as communicating with sponsors and delegates at appropriate times, says Steven Turner, Director of Anagram Events Australia.

In fact, the 2015 SmithBucklin survey found that accessing specialised talent was the number-one expected benefit of outsourcing, followed by increasing organisational capacity and staff flexibility.

For overseas conferences, PCOs can also help with the finer details, such as obtaining visas.

As part of the process of choosing a PCO, it’s important to meet the team members with whom you would be working so you can assess if the fit is right, says Tonkin.

“You get the best from your PCO by working collaboratively with them – sharing your vision, tapping into their know-how, inviting their input and keeping them informed.”

You should be very clear about your expectations if you’re using a PCO, says Lidia Dalton, and capitalise on their existing networks and industry connections to get the best value for money.

“Often a PCO can negotiate better rates with venues and suppliers than if that client went directly to the supplier, due to their buying power, experience and understanding of how conferences work,” she says.

And, of course, there’s the added benefit of avoiding all that aforementioned stress.

Setting the scene

Innovation is essential in every aspect of conferences, and regularly changing the venue, including the location, is all part of a creative approach to events.

According to the *American Express 2018 Global Meetings and Events Forecast*, meetings and events are increasingly at the forefront of how companies promote themselves, something that applies to associations, too.

“They require great investment in terms of time and money and the resulting return on investment can spur new growth for a company,” the report reads. “As meetings and events continue to be central to the success of a business, aligning them with an overall strategy is crucial – but developing that strategy and putting it into practice can be challenging.”

Part of this strategy is choosing the meeting location. Conference organisers need to select a destination that showcases their association values and aspirations, and reflects their brand.

LOCATION, LOCATION

Perhaps not surprisingly, an attractive location can significantly boost conference attendance. Overseas locations, even more so.

Lidia Dalton of Expert Events says international locales are an absolute drawcard for delegates, especially those in a sector whose members can afford the cost.

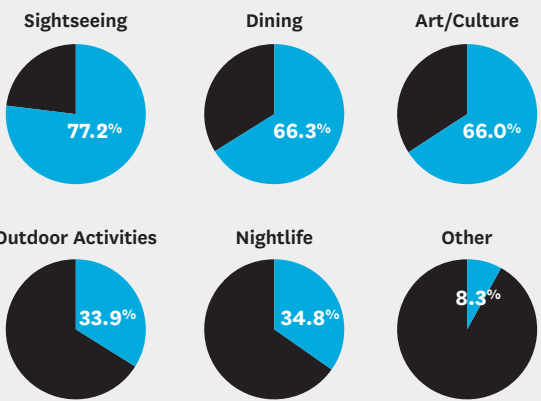
As an example, she has been organising an association conference in Queenstown, in New Zealand’s South Island, and while the membership is mainly Australian-based, there will be a strong delegate presence.

“In the analysis of where to go, Queenstown came out on top as an attractive destination,” she says. “It won’t be ski season, but we will be giving people as much information as possible about the area and the main tourist attractions of the region.”

Bleisure travel, which combines business and leisure, is the new catchword. A study by the Global Business Travel Association (which surveyed 675 business travellers from the US and Canada last year) shows almost half of Millennial business travellers add a leisure component to their business trips.

BridgeStreet Global Hospitality’s The Bleisure Report 2014 found 83 per cent of 640 international guests surveyed used time on business trips to explore the city they were visiting, with the three most popular bleisure activities being sightseeing, dining and arts/culture.

THE MOST POPULAR LEISURE ACTIVITIES WHILE TRAVELLING FOR BUSINESS



Source: BridgeStreet Global Hospitality’s The Bleisure Report 2014

Similarly, Tourism Australia research on association conference delegate behaviour found providing a balance of conference content and a really appealing destination was the ideal combination for attracting delegates. Interestingly, the best memories of the event tended to come from outside the conference.

In this case, the conference website is crucial. “The majority of delegates must build a case to gain approval to travel to a conference, and the ability to quickly gather information on the return on investment of attending can be very helpful in putting this case together,” says the report.

To build a case for conference attendance, associations can include the following on their website, according to Tourism Australia:

- Programme content, including networking and development opportunities, speakers and other delegates attending
- Early-bird and special pricing or value-add offers, which can help build a strong economic case for registration and travel
- Information about the destination, including what there is to do and see, so delegates can see why they should extend their trip



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

While large cities are the primary locations for meetings, according to the American Express report, it’s worth considering more affordable regional areas, as these can be just as attractive for attendees, and can offer something unique.

Of course, some conferences are limited because of their size, in which case Kate Mather of South Coast Experiences says choosing a venue outside the norm may be a clever way to offer something unique.

According to Eventbrite, unique venues will be an event trend of 2018, helping to create a “one-of-a-kind experience” for attendees. It says demand for non-traditional spaces has grown by 3.8 per cent in 2017 alone.

Alternatives include industrial spaces, function sheds, private holiday accommodation properties with a function room, community halls and theatres, school halls and large sporting arenas with function clubhouses. It isn’t so much about the type of venue but that it offers what attendees want, including good amenities, plenty of natural light and fresh air, comfortable seating, and flexibility for different styles of presentations (TEDx-style talks, for example).

The cost-effectiveness of alternative venues needs to be carefully calculated, says Jan Tonkin, President of IAPCO, as it may be that by the time all the requisite furniture and equipment is brought in, a purpose-built venue may be better value.

“That said, creating just the right environment is crucial and it may be that alternative venues serve a client’s purpose better than traditional conference venues.”

Rather than ruling out typical venues on the assumption that they’re unaffordable, Tonkin advises contacting venue management. “There may be any number of reasons why they are unable to offer a competitive rate, such as time of year or some of the space being used by another client. But you might find the remaining space is just right,” she says.

Conference organisers need to select a destination that showcases their association values and aspirations, and reflects their brand

Traditional venues, of course, provide much of what attendees want. In New Zealand, for example, venues such as the New Zealand International Convention Centre (NZICC) and the Christchurch Convention and Exhibition Centre have not only been designed with audiences in mind, providing features such as natural lighting, fresh air, views and a location close to amenities and transport, but they are futuristic, incorporating the latest and best in the industry.

The Christchurch Convention Centre, situated in a prime riverside location, close to all the city’s amenities, has been purpose-built with world-class architecture and features. The venue is vast in scale, and will host up to 2000 people when it opens in 2020, with the auditorium able to host two 700-people events at the same time.

But aside from being up-to-date with the latest trends, it’s also an aspirational venue with an intricate design reflecting both the past and present, which is set to encapsulate the values of many a brand looking for an event venue. The Christchurch Convention Centre’s design is reminiscent of the curves of the rivers of New Zealand’s South Island, while stories of the local Māori culture are incorporated through every architectural aspect.



The facts on figures

Conference fees can impact both attendance numbers and perceived value – not to mention profits. Here are the keys to ensuring the price is right.

Setting the right conference registration fee is a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, you want it high enough to cover your costs and then some, but you don't want to discourage delegates from attending, either.

Many associations choose to keep the fee low, but Brett Jeffery, New Zealand General Manager of the Australasian Society of Association Executives, says increasing the fee can improve the perceived value from a delegate's perspective, which in turn can actually attract more attendees.

Jan Tonkin, President of IAPCO, adds that if you create a compelling experience and give audiences what they want, price is not the primary consideration.

"Surveying your association members about what constitutes value for them is crucial," she says. "Then take that into account when designing your conference."

PRICING METHODS

There are several pricing methods for conferences, according to Eventbrite.

- Cost-plus: a fee that covers costs and a little more
- Competitive: based on charging the same as competitors
- Value-based: setting a fee according to the perceived value, which is essentially charging what conference attendees are willing to pay

Value-based is the most profitable, according to *Eventbrite's Conference Registration Pricing: 3 Steps to Increase Profit*. In this model, the price is set lower than the delegate's perceived value, which gives them impetus to register.

As long as the event costs are lower, you'll profit.

"Value-based pricing ensures you'll earn a return, while delivering customers a meaningful 'surplus' above the ticket price," the report reads.

"Achieve this and you will have a profitable event and happy attendees."

THE CONSIDERATIONS

For an association conference, delegates are usually charged one registration fee, which by and large covers the content, including speakers and forums, food and beverages, and a gala dinner.

In determining the registration fee, the costs of the conference obviously need to be taken into account, but there are many other factors to consider, including:

- How many delegates are expected to attend
- What the delegates can afford to pay
- The other costs of attending the event
- The level of sponsorship

There's no set rate for the registration fee, and Jeffery estimates they range between AUD \$500 and AUD \$1,800.

Fees can vary depending on whether delegates are members, non-members, life members, students and members of associated organisations.

Organisers may also choose to offer discounts for "early bird" registration fees, to encourage attendees to sign up.

Another option to increase attendance is to give delegates the option of paying per session rather than for the whole

conference, as this may draw in those who can't, or don't want to, attend all day every day.

If you're doing live streaming of your conference sessions or offering online access to a recorded version, it's also wise to charge a separate fee. This not only helps with covering the costs of providing the service, but also helps to incentivise people to come to the event rather than just watching for free later. The other option is just to provide this content to attendees.

Whatever pricing is set, it must be determined prior to sales taking place – with no changes after that time – and clearly defined in advance for each group to avoid confusion.

Since the conference fee, along with travel costs such as transport and accommodation, are paid by either the delegate or their employer (rather than by one big company, as is the case with corporations), it will be connected to the association's sector and the ability of members to pay, says Jeffery.

For example, a medical conference may be able to charge up to AUD \$3000 for three days, but a teachers' conference may be able to charge only one-third of that.

It's relevant then for associations to also consider the other costs associated with attending events, including travel. To offset travelling costs, event organisers can consider offering cheaper travel to and from the venue, such as a shuttle or discounted public transport passes, so attendees can avoid car hire costs and parking.

Negotiating a discounted group booking fee for hotel accommodation can also help minimise costs for delegates.

BUDGETING IS ESSENTIAL

It can be difficult to deliver high-level content on a budget, says Barry Neame, President of the Professional Conference Organisers Association. You can't compromise on one thing and expect the other, he says. That is, you can't set a fee to attract delegates and think they will still have a good time – and want to come back again – if you haven't set it high enough to cover activities.

To get the budget right, it's necessary to consider all the costs, and ensure from the outset that you will at least break even. Some costs are fixed, such as speakers and the venue, but others, such as food and beverages, are variable.

Jaylene Young, an Australian marketing and events professional, says fees need to be set to "break even with a worst-case attendee number".

For example, she says, if you charge AUD \$200 a person for a minimum of 50 people – i.e., a total of AUD \$10,000 – you'll need to be sure your worst-case scenario costs are less than AUD \$10,000 and, if so, you could even decrease the ticket cost.

As sponsorships are confirmed, she says, you could probably lower the fee again because the extra money will reduce your overall costs. "Just make sure you can confirm the majority

HOTTEST TICKETS

See how the cost of your event stacks up against the most expensive events in the world.

- 1. TED Conference, US: AUD \$318,373**
First-time attendees to this five-day US conference pay as little as AUD \$6,307, but for patron status, you'll need a very large wad of cash. However, you'll get your name on the program and website, early access and prime seating, flexible registration and top-of-the line accommodation.
 - 2. The World Economic Forum, Switzerland: AUD \$23,878**
Originally focused on Europe's businesses, the elite four-day conference has expanded to include companies from around the world – as long as your annual revenue is over a billion dollars.
 - 3. Demo, US: AUD \$23,560**
Speakers are only allowed six minutes to pitch their products to potential investors at this technology-focused conference, and no presentation aids are permitted.
 - 4. WSJD Live, US: AUD \$6,367+**
This annual California conference hosted by The Wall Street Journal features some of the world's most important influencers across sectors such as finance, government and industry.
 - 5. Summit Series, US: AUD \$3,182+**
This Utah-based conference is invitation-only, and prices vary, but a good time is almost guaranteed. The legendary parties and activities hosted by the founding entrepreneurs have drawn comparisons to America's famous Burning Man festival.
 - 6. Ice Vox, UK: AUD \$2,729**
The gaming industry's apex gathering, with nine different conferences under the one umbrella, focuses on everything from cybercrime to game design and development.
 - 7. PopTech, US: AUD \$3,239**
"A convening of brilliant minds from different corners of the world" goes the slogan and attendees at the three-day conference in Maine can expect to hear from the likes of actors, musicians and neuroscientists.
- Source:** *Event Manager Blog*

of sponsors before opening ticket sales," she says.

For associations, however, the extra money from sponsorships is where they can derive that all-important revenue stream, so reducing fees may not be the best option, especially if delegates see value in the rate already set.

Win-win: how partnering pays

Showing partners a return on investment – and ensuring it’s delivered – is key to attracting sponsorship dollars.

Sponsorship is an important revenue generator for association conferences. It helps with costs and can bring the registration fee down for delegates, which in turn may encourage higher attendance.

When looking for sponsors, consider businesses that have some connection with your association, says Barry Neame, President of the Professional Conference Organisers Association. “Find some synergy and then develop an appealing offering or value proposition for them,” he says.

Sponsors are increasingly looking for a return on their investment (ROI) rather than just providing a donation, says Neame.

According to data from Sponsez, 75 per cent of sponsors are always looking for new partnerships, and this willingness to shop around means it’s more important than ever to be delivering value.

But how is that value assessed? Associations should consider creating a prospectus for potential exhibitors and sponsors outlining what they will get in return for their dollar, including branding opportunities and speaking opportunities. Include how many delegates are expected to attend your events – and hence how many potential customers a sponsor will have access to.

Once a sponsor is on board, you need to ensure they get the maximum ROI at the conference. Strategies might include sharing the contact details of attendees (with their permission) so sponsors can get in touch with them after the event, suggests Steven Turner, Director of Anagram Events Australia. Or giving delegates a badge with a barcode so sponsors can scan and upload contact details onto their database (again, with permission).

“Sponsors want to offer value, provide solutions and create deeper, long-lasting connections with your attendees”

– Chris Baylis, Sponsorship Collective

“Sponsorship is a partnership between your event and your sponsors. It’s a two-way street that requires sincere interest in the sponsor’s objectives and how you can help them achieve goals”

– Eventbrite’s 2017 Guide to Event Sponsorship

According to Event Manager Blog, the days of providing a traditional booth, banner and logo are gone. Associations need to find innovative and creative ways for their partners to engage and “wow” attendees and create a lasting impression.

The blog suggests everything from “play areas” with games or craft areas and fitness sessions to branded sample products, goodie bags and photo booths. Sponsored live streaming is another option.

With so much competition in the conference space, it’s not enough to provide basic logos and access to attendees to create brand awareness, according to the *Eventbrite’s 2017 Guide to Event Sponsorship*. Rather, it’s more about how sponsors can interact with attendees.

“If you want to win sponsorship today, you’re going to have to know who your attendees are and how sponsors can help them,” says Katie O’Neill, Senior Corporate Events Manager for LogMeIn, in the report.

Sponsorship Collective President and CEO Chris Baylis says while there are still aspects of sponsorship focused on brand awareness, there’s a new paradigm in play. “Sponsors don’t just want your attendees to be aware of their product or service,” he tells Eventbrite. “They want to offer value, provide solutions and create deeper, long-lasting connections with your attendees.”

Marketing and events professional Jaylene Young’s advice is to avoid going to a potential sponsor with a prepared “you get this for this amount of money” proposal. “That just

shows you want money,” she says. Rather, she suggests, ask what they want from your association and its members.

“It might be your email list. Giving a sponsor a spot in your e-newsletter each month might be worth \$5000 to them, depending on your mailing list size, the demographic and whatever product or service they want to promote.”

It’s best to think in terms of partnerships rather than sponsors, she says. “You’ll get more value out of an ongoing partnership than a one-off, ‘Here, have some money for a logo and a banner’.”

The Eventbrite report reiterates this point, advising planners to “listen, listen, listen” to sponsors: “Sponsorship is a partnership between your event and your sponsors. It’s a two-way street that requires sincere interest in the sponsor’s objectives and how you can help them achieve goals.”

BALANCING ACT

Delivering value to both sponsors and delegates can be a tricky proposition. While it’s essential to deliver a ROI for sponsors, associations need to ensure they’re not being

hamstrung to include content that isn’t relevant or interesting.

“Delegates want to hear industry leaders talk about innovative stuff,” Jeffery says. “That might involve cutting back sponsor speaking opportunities to 50 per cent rather than 70 per cent.”

He also stresses that the delegate-exhibitor ratio is a vital consideration. While associations want as many exhibitors as possible for revenue purposes, the ratio of delegates to exhibitors should be about 70:30. “Some companies say they have 500 people that attend the conference, but 350 are exhibitors and 150 are delegates,” he says. “How scary is that for a delegate? When they walk out to morning tea it’s like a shark pool. More exhibitors make you more money but actually, long-term, it scares delegates off.”

A greater number of delegates at a conference provides sponsors with an unmatched opportunity to speak to potential customers, but when they are given the opportunity to speak, it shouldn’t just be a sales pitch. Rather it’s imperative to provide interesting and relevant content to grab and retain the attention of delegates, rather than boasting, which will see them switch off. This way, the message will be remembered and that long-lasting connection created.





Students of innovation

The Australian Boarding Schools Association has a track record of providing events that are not only informative – but a whole deal of fun, too.

Since events are a key revenue generator for the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA), it works hard to deliver a memorable experience for delegates, to provide value and keep them engaged.

The association runs about 80 events each year, including symposiums, training workshops and conferences. The large annual national conference is a two-day leaders’ event held in odd years while a 3.5-day event held in even years is open to everyone.

The ABSA’s three staff members are responsible for all the events, led by Executive Director Richard Stokes, whose years

“This year we decided to put a single speaker on for the whole conference, and it was outstanding. People loved it” – Richard Stokes, ABSA

of experience have given him the confidence to run not only a great event, but the skills to negotiate so costs are kept down.

BEST PRACTICE

The ABSA has recently turned 10, a landmark anniversary which has spurred Stokes and his team to look at how they can do events differently.

While the association’s membership cannot expand because every boarding school in the country is already a member, there is scope to build on already-strong delegate numbers and to ensure they return every year.

To do that, innovation is vital, not only to provide a different experience from a previous event, but to find the best way to do things, says Stokes. He’s always researching and attending other events to find inspiration.

Stokes stresses how important creative content is, and choosing engaging speakers is a key component of that. In 2016, for example, it was Holly Ransom, the chief executive of millennial marketing specialist Emergent and a Director of Port Adelaide Football Club in Australia.

But being innovative also means doing things differently. “Usually we had keynote speakers to start and finish, then we did three workshops, which everyone rotated around. But it got stale,” Stokes says. “For this year’s conference we decided to put a single speaker on for the whole conference, and it was outstanding. People loved it.”

The speaker was brought from the US to Australia for about \$10,000 plus accommodation, and spoke on four or five topics.

Stokes says the speaker introduced innovative activities, such as sending people outside in groups and getting them to interview one another about boarding schools. Videos of the interviews were viewed in a group setting and put on social media.

“Speed sessions” were also introduced last year, which Stokes says was an “interesting difference”. It works, he says, by having 25 people – a mix of delegates and sponsors – at individual tables to hear a 10-minute presentation. The group then has three minutes to move to the next table and listen to another presenter for 10 minutes, and so on.

“That was one of the greatest things we’ve run. It had the highest rating; people got so much information in such a short time. It hit its straps the first time and I’ll do it again without a doubt.”

Content is more important than the “wow” factor that can come with technology, says Stokes. He adds that boarding school staff tend to trend towards traditional and, as such, often prefer hard copy or written content, but the association does use some technology for its events. This includes social media and Microsoft’s free event app, EventsXD.

A STAR ATTRACTION

While it’s vital to get the content right, Stokes believes it’s also essential for delegates to have a good time. This might include giving them an afternoon off and adequate breaks to answer emails, check social media and talk to one another.

It also involves creating one “highlight” experience. “I always run a very unusually spectacular and memorable event, which will be remembered because people enjoy it so much,” says Stokes. “That’s something we’ve done with great effect over the past few years.”

In 2017, attendees were taken on a ferry to one of the delegate schools on Sydney Harbour, where they enjoyed a catered meal. The previous year, when the event was held on the Gold Coast, delegates cruised to an island, where they had dinner on the beach complete with fireworks. Next year the ABSA will stage a dinner at the MCG in Melbourne, with a big-name singer as the main attraction.

“You’ve got to do something really remarkable, something people will talk about,” says Stokes. “People often remember

the information they learn at a conference because of the experience they’ve had.”

Food also plays a role. At ABSA events, each day’s catering has a theme. It might be Australian cuisine, with a sausage sizzle, pies and pavlovas, or Wimbledon, where Pimm’s and cucumber sandwiches are served on a tennis court.

THE BOTTOM LINE

About a third of the ABSA’s revenue comes from events, and the fees are set so the association will make a profit. While some members may initially balk at the conference fee, after having a great experience and seeing value for money, it no longer becomes an issue.

Stokes says sometimes the association has offered “four for the price of three” deals to attract more delegates, but he doesn’t want the conference to grow too big because it would detract from the enjoyment.

Locations are carefully chosen and while many events are rotated around the country according to where delegates live, bigger functions such as the national conference are held in big-ticket destinations such as the Gold Coast, which also has cheap accommodation. The 2018 conference in Melbourne will take place just after the AFL grand final so that delegates can attend both events.

The ABSA has many partnerships with companies, which provide another third of the association’s income (the final third comes from membership fees). Stokes says each partner is given two delegate spaces at the national conference, and they are required to participate actively to ensure a mutually beneficial experience for both themselves and delegates.

“We’re very conscious of making sure we only use partners who are really spot-on for our people and schools,” Stokes says. “We don’t want to be in a situation where we overwhelm our members with partners who aren’t going to provide them with anything useful.”

“You’ve got to do something really remarkable, something people will talk about. People often remember the information they learn at a conference because of the experience they’ve had” – Richard Stokes, ABSA

Building with innovation

For this builders’ association, a constantly evolving programme is part of what continues to draw members to its conference.

Rather than sticking with what is tried and true, the New Zealand Certified Builders Association is always looking to innovate when it comes to its yearly conference to ensure its delegates keep returning. And so far, it’s a policy that is paying dividends.

Turnout has continued to increase each year. In 2017, 750 people attended the 19th Annual Conference and Expo, including about 600 delegates.

“I’ve been running the conferences for six years and every year it’s changed,” says Eve Cooper, Membership Services Manager at NZCB. “Every year we look at what worked and what didn’t work, and then we bring in new aspects.

“I’m constantly doing research to see what other associations or professional conference organisers are doing, and I adopt and add things that I think will benefit our delegates and exhibitors,” she says.

The conference is an important aspect of the NZCB’s work, says Cooper, so it must be done well. “Not only does it bring our members together for the annual general meeting where they get to have their say, but it also educates them and fosters the sense of the NZCB community ... all of which helps to build a strong and proud membership.”

ON LOCATION

The NZCB holds its annual two-day conference over a weekend, and every year the venue changes. For two years in a row it’s held somewhere on the North Island, and the next year it’s the South Island.

In 2017, the conference, which was held in late May at the ANZ Viaduct Events Centre in Auckland, was opened by then Prime Minister Bill English, which was a “pretty big deal”, says Cooper.

How did the association manage to get the PM to open the event? “We asked him,” Cooper says. “You don’t ask, you don’t get!”

When deciding on the venue, Cooper takes into account what’s in the surrounding area, including food and entertainment options.

The Viaduct Events Centre, for instance, is in an area known for its superyachts and fabulous restaurants and bars, which Cooper knew would be a drawcard for delegates.

WHAT ARE AUDIENCES GETTING?

There are many components to NZCB’s annual conference, including more formal agenda items, the first of which is the AGM. There are also speakers and educational sessions, where members are kept up to date on issues such as legislation, including changes in government regulations that affect the building industry.

There’s plenty of fun to be had too, including a fancy-dress awards dinner and lots of networking sessions, which are usually held externally in a more casual setting.

“Since we don’t necessarily put entertainment on, we hold these in places of interest, such as a museum,” says Cooper. “Next year we’re going to a Māori carving school in Rotorua.”

To add events that aren’t costly, the NZCB organises free factory tours, with transport usually provided by the manufacturers themselves. There are also optional events such as playing golf or visiting a winery. The 2018 conference in Rotorua will feature more adrenaline-inducing activities, such as white-water rafting.

Each year Cooper seeks post-conference feedback from delegates via surveys. From this, she knows that their number one reason for attending is networking. “They want to pick each other’s brains,” she says. “Everybody is in the same boat as everybody else. They’re all SMEs [small- and medium-sized enterprises] with the same plights and problems. You can see them sharing ideas.”

In the conference debrief, everything is reassessed and events that didn’t work are removed. In 2017 that included a “speaker’s corner”, where speakers could show 20 slides in 20 minutes for a fee. However, it didn’t give exhibitors the value they expected.

“It’s never hard trying to find exhibitors because delegates are engaging with them. They’re wanting to learn about new products and services”

– Eve Cooper, NZCB

KEEPING FEES LOW

The NZCB charges only \$150 plus GST to attend their two-day conference and expo, and \$85 plus GST for any additional person the delegate brings with them. This seems relatively affordable compared with other association conferences, says Cooper. The cost includes catering and beverages, but evening functions are an optional extra.

Despite the low fee, Cooper says the association does make money from the conference, which the not-for-profit organisation puts straight back into helping its members.

The focus is on keeping fees down because Cooper doesn’t believe delegates will keep attending if the price goes up. But exhibitors – many of which are sponsors – subsidise a generous proportion of the costs. “Without them, we definitely wouldn’t be able to put on conferences as large and successful as we have,” she says.

The value for sponsors comes in what they get out of it, and that’s business. “It’s never hard trying to find exhibitors,” says Cooper. “They want to exhibit at our conference because delegates are engaging with them. They’re wanting to learn about new products and services.”

Since there is such demand from exhibitors and sponsors, the NZCB hasn’t had to change its sponsorship plan for some time. Sponsors are offered a standard package, Cooper says, which includes an address to members and excellent exposure of their logo.

DRAWING THE YOUNG CROWD

Once members come to an NZCB conference, they’ll usually return, but the trick is getting them there in the first place, especially those in the younger demographic.

“It’s quite challenging; it’s quite possibly my biggest problem,” Cooper says. “Younger people probably think it’s just about stuffy suits, but it’s not. It’s really a lot of fun.”

A big part of attracting younger members is through advertising, including on social media, by electronic direct mail and in the association’s bi-monthly magazine. The NZCB also offers a 50 per cent discount for new members who attend.

Another innovation is the Regional Apprentice Challenge, in which second-, third- and fourth-year apprentices from 16 regional training providers are challenged to build a specified project over a set period of time. Each regional winner then competes for a national title at the conference and expo by building another item – with the delegates as their audience.

In 2016 they built bicycles out of plywood, and last year they built trolley carts and raced them, complete with wheels falling off and bicycles collapsing.

“It was all about involving the next generation in our association,” says Cooper.

GREAT GIZMOS

The NZCB has been using the event app ShowGizmo for a few years and, in 2017, got rid of printed programmes. Cooper says it has definitely been worth the initial \$8000 outlay, which was halved in the second year, with savings in both the cost and time involved in producing printed programmes.

She says some of the cost was recouped by using the app to sell lead qualifications and digital passports to exhibitors.

“At first, I wondered how many people would adopt it, but walking around I could see nearly everybody was looking at the agenda on their phone,” she says. “Every piece of information about the conference was in the palm of your hand, including the show floor.

“You can make personal programmes if you want to attend certain things, and send instant messages to people on the floor.”



Bringing down the house

How the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand continues to captivate its members with events that engage and inspire.

The key objective of the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand (REINZ) is to improve professionalism, provide support and services to its 15,000 members and to keep pace with change across all facets of the industry.

Events are a significant aspect of the way the organisation does its job and it holds four key events each year:

- National Auctioneering Championships
- National Conference
- Awards for Excellence in Real Estate
- Annual General Meeting

Among the smaller events are sports tournaments, breakfast meetings and seminars.

A team of two runs all the events, with some outside help. REINZ Events Manager Louise Gordon emphasises the importance of having a strong network of event partners (or sponsors) and trusted suppliers.

Innovation is also critical, she says, particularly for long-standing events. “If the recipe works, we don’t tend to deviate. But we like to freshen things up with modern venues, the use of props and giveaways, for example.”

THE LAWS OF ATTRACTION

Under New Zealand law, all licensed real-estate agents must achieve 10 verifiable and 10 non-verifiable training hours each year to keep their licences up to date.

Attending most REINZ events provides the latter, but Gordon says the organisation faces challenges in maintaining delegate numbers.

“Every year we are increasing attendance at the main events but sometimes it’s hard to get the numbers at smaller regional events. This can be due to competing industry events and the challenge of busy members making the time to commit.”

To attract delegates, marketing tactics include advertising on the REINZ website, fortnightly email newsletters and, closer to the date of the event, individual emails.

“We’re also looking at text apps because many of our members conduct much of their business on their mobile phones,” she says.

To engage younger members, REINZ has become involved with another organisation, Young Professionals in Real Estate (YPIRE). “The intention is to hold four annual events for YPIRE where people will come to a bar or cafe-style venue, listen to an engaging topical speaker, then network over drinks and canapés,” Gordon says.

“This demographic is extremely important to REINZ in order to support the next generation of agents.”

THE PERFECT FIT

Content, speakers and activities are more important than the venue or technology at REINZ events, according to Gordon. REINZ ensures the content is relevant and tailored to the audience, with a particular focus on speakers and forum discussions.

“The mantra ‘What’s in it for me?’ is always top of mind when planning our events,” Gordon says. “A rural sector audience will want a rural-focused speaker whereas a business broker or commercial and industrial broker will want to hear what’s relevant for their day-to-day jobs.

“We recently held nationwide meetings for the residential property management sector to inform them of updates to the new methamphetamine standards [regarding the testing and decontamination of methamphetamine-contaminated properties] and all these meetings were full to capacity because it is such a topical issue.

“Working within real estate can often be quite lonely and people particularly enjoy networking events where they can discuss issues with like-minded colleagues”

– Louise Gordon, REINZ

“The mantra ‘What’s in it for me?’ is always top of mind when planning our events”

– Louise Gordon, REINZ

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPONSORS

Events are not a key revenue generator for REINZ and, being an incorporated society, it doesn’t seek to make a profit, but it’s important at least to break even and use funds appropriately, says Gordon. So keeping costs down is always front of mind.

Attendance fees have remained fairly stagnant, except for \$5 or \$10 increases to keep up with increasing overheads. Some events are free, which makes it even more crucial for the institute to keep costs down, especially if sponsorship hasn’t been secured, says Gordon.

While it’s always a challenge to keep both sponsors and audiences happy, Gordon says she’s found that keeping communication open with sponsors, providing regular feedback about events they sponsor and holding an annual “thank you” cocktail evening work well.

To deliver value for sponsors, Gordon focuses on the benefit of a joint marketing activity for REINZ and its event partners – most of which are well known within the real-estate industry.

“I send a customised letter to our event partners outlining the benefits of different events and the opportunities to increase brand awareness,” she says. “I outline every promotional and marketing opportunity that could possibly be of value to a potential sponsor. These include magazine advertising, email banners, electronic direct mail [EDM] messaging, social media presence, press statements, media coverage, profiling brand story and logos, signage and pre-event advertising to our 15,000 members nationwide.”

“Working within real estate can often be quite lonely and people seem to particularly enjoy networking events where they can discuss the day-to-day issues they face with like-minded colleagues.”

When choosing speakers for events, Gordon says REINZ doesn’t have the budget to engage top overseas names, so will often approach the major real-estate companies to recommend their top performers.

“These ‘superstars’ often agree to share their tips and tricks in panel discussions at a breakfast, for example. We always find these events are sell-outs.

“Our generous event partners regularly support certain events, which enables us to provide gifts to all members who register and pay to attend.”

A supportive board and chief executive regularly put her in contact with excellent speakers who are prepared to present for free.

“We also have sector-group committees and I often approach these people to assist with ideas and connections.”

While technology isn’t of prime importance, REINZ does use some, such as Eventbrite, an online system that enables members to log in, pay and accept a calendar invitation. It also provides a map to the venue and a printed ticket.

At larger events, the institute often has an audio-visual supplier provide the latest technology, lighting effects and video recording.

“I send a customised letter to our event partners outlining the benefits of different events and the opportunities to increase brand awareness”

– Louise Gordon, REINZ





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