Maximizing the Attendee Experience

11 WAYS TO MEET AND EXCEED EXPECTATIONS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER YOUR EVENTS

47 Perimeter Center E, Suite 300 | Atlanta, Georgia 30346 | sales@membersuite.com | (678) 606-0310 | www.membersuite.com

Introduction

When it comes to spending money and time on professional development and networking, members and others in your audience have many choices. You have to provide an event attendee experience like no other so they keep returning and sharing their enthusiasm. The attendee experience starts before they arrive on site. It may begin with one of your marketing emails or a visit to your website or member portal. As you develop a strategy for these digital interactions, you must answer this question: What do prospective attendees expect and need from your event?

Find out about their education and networking goals, and learn about their questions, pain points, needs, and expectations at each stage of their attendee journey—before, during, and after the event. The more you understand, the better you can design an attendee experience that meets their needs and exceeds their expectations.

Read on to learn how to offer a great attendee experience before, during and after your event.

#1. Connect Your Event with the Attendee's Goals

Before we discuss the attendee's goals, let's remember your pre-event goals: introduce the event to the prospect and convince them to register.

To achieve these goals, you have a selection of proven resources and tools:

- Prospect, attendee, and member data in your association management software (AMS)
- Email marketing platform
- Website or member portal
- Word-of-mouth marketing assets, for example, photos, videos, and testimonials from past attendees

Before making the decision to invest their time and money, prospective attendees learn as much as they can about the event on your website or member portal. Your marketing copy must answer the WIIFM question—what's in it for me (the attendee). You also have to answer any other questions and address any obstacles standing in the way of the "register" decision. Answer the questions they're thinking about, and the questions they hadn't thought of but are glad you answered.

You must also describe the value or impact the event will make on their work, job, career, business, and/or life. Focus on the benefits of interest to the prospect, not just the features of the event. You won't be able to make this distinction unless you understand their goals, needs, and challenges.

Don't email the same marketing messages to everyone. Different segments of your audience have different needs and interests. Segment your list for targeted communications. A CEO's reasons for going to your event are likely different than a mid-level director or young professional's reasons. Exhibitors have different goals than practicing professionals. A first-time attendee has different needs than a longtime attendee.

Keep in mind, you may have to convince two people, first, the prospective attendee, then, their boss. Provide a sample letter or talking points that a prospective attendee can use to make a case for attending your event.

#2. Take Care of All the Details

Attendees expect the event organizer to deliver a flawless event experience. They seek justification that spending their time and money with you is a wise investment of resources.

On your end, these high expectations mean you must have all event details hammered out. Plus, you have to provide all the information needed by your prospective attendees and by your other key stakeholders—exhibitors/sponsors and speakers.

Technology makes the seemingly impossible possible. Everything starts in your AMS when you create an event—or save time by duplicating a previous event. The processes you manage in your event management solution keep your team on task but also give attendees, exhibitors, sponsors, and speakers the information they need to prepare for the event, for example:

- Event agenda with session titles, descriptions, speakers, and times.
- Room logistics for A/V and room set (table/seating).
- Exhibitor and sponsor management with booth types, categories, priorities, assignments, pricing, and contacts for billing, administrative needs and staffing.
- Speaker and abstract management for session proposal submission, judging, and selection, as well as room assignments and scheduling.
- Registration details including pricing (member/non-member, early bird, VIP, exhibitor, and sponsor), promo codes for volunteers and speakers, and deadlines.

#3. Make Online Registration a Breeze

You've done it! After reviewing your event information, the prospect made the decision to register. As long you meet their expectations during the registration process, including the ability to easily register themselves and others, success is only a few clicks away.

What does the prospect expect at this point? Speed and clarity. If you frustrate or confuse them, you may lose them. Keep the registration form as simple as possible. Only ask for data that you plan to use before or during the event.

#4. Prepare Attendees for the Event

Set your event apart from others by helping attendees get prepared and ready. They want to be in the know, not clueless and confused, especially when it's their first event, but even when it's their sixth.

Send out pre-event emails to educate and excite them—maybe they'll share their enthusiasm with others. Publish this same information on your website or member portal since some people rarely open your emails. Whether it's a month ahead of time or during their flight to the host city, attendees want to make decisions about sessions, see who else is going, and plan their agenda by setting up meetings with exhibitors and dinners with other attendees.

Segment these informational emails so they're relevant to the target audience, for example:

- First-time attendees
- Attendees returning after a long absence
- Executives
- Young professionals
- Certification applicants and holders
- International travelers
- Exhibitors

Ensure attendees feel "at home" right away by demystifying the event experience. Sure, the veterans can find their way around, but first-timers (and even some event alums) may wonder who can visit the lounges or go to the exhibitor parties they keep hearing about. Attendees also appreciate learning about your event's code of conduct, if you have one.

Share advice on your blog, member portal, or event site about getting the most out of the event, for example:

- Guidance for preparing themselves or their team for the conference
- Networking tips for introverts
- Advice from longtime conference goers
- Conference wellness tips
- Ideas for exploring the city before the event—extra nights help your room block too
- Action plan for sharing ideas with co-workers and putting great ideas into action

Exhibitors could benefit from:

- Learning how to network for relationships, not business cards
- Tips for emailing attendees before the event, if you provide a list
- Advice for following up with leads

#5. Make a Memorable First Impression

You can start making an excellent impression at registration. Attendees might expect long lines as they wait for staff to find their packet and badge. Here's where you start delighting them with different check-in options. For example, let them speed up the process at a self-check-in kiosk. Or, for a quick and hassle-free experience, give your registration staff a Check-In app.

You can automatically sync attendee registration data to the app so staff have all the information they need to make each attendee feel recognized and welcome. For example, staff can see in the app's notes that you have a special gift bag set aside for Attendee Alice who is attending her 20th show (a real VIP). They can also spot first-time attendees and make a big fuss about them too.

Additionally, event technology can enable automatic text alerts when specific attendees check-in. For example, your team can preset an alert so that when Attendee Alberto checks in, a premier sponsor, a text message is automatically sent to the CEO and a colleague on the exhibits team so she can go over to his exhibit booth and welcome him in person.

With a Check-In app, attendee badges print automatically and any wearable technology or QR code is activated—more on that in a minute.

> *There's no excuse for long waits when you can have technology that's designed to make attendee check-in a quick, personal experience.*

#6. Capture Attendee Engagement Data Throughout the Event

With the right data, you can enhance your attendees' event experience. That concept might have sounded outlandish several years ago, but data represents knowledge about what's happening in the event venue. For example, you can:

- See which rooms are filling up so you can respond with extra chairs right away.
- Identify the most popular sessions so you can schedule encore sessions for those who couldn't get into the room.
- Analyze show floor traffic patterns so you can adjust the location of lounge seating and coffee stations to encourage traffic in less-visited areas.

All this is possible with scanning technology, such as NFC-powered wristbands or badges with QR codes, that tracks attendance at sessions, keynotes, and other event locations. NFC stands for near field communication, a wireless, close-proximity communication between a device and an NFC-powered wearable technology.

Use these badges or wristbands to control access to exclusive events, for example, paid pre-conference workshops, VIP or members-only events, or first-time attendee breakfasts.

You can also find out what scan-required activities an attendee experienced. For example, you can arrange for a roaming photographer to take photos of attendees. To get those photos delivered, attendees have to get their badge or wristband scanned. Later, you can remind attendees to share and hashtag their photos on social media—spreading the buzz about your event.

Modernize CEU credit tracking too. You can see who is eligible for CEU credit by tracking who went to a session and how long they stayed there. Even better, you no longer have to go through hundreds of pages of session sign-in sheets and manually enter all that data into your AMS or LMS. Instead, you only have to upload a file.

#7. Set Attendees Up for Success

Savvy conference attendees arrive on site with questions they want to answer and goals they hope to achieve, but they're the exception, not the rule.

Give every attendee the necessary resources to make the most of their limited time at the conference. For example, provide a tool they can use to:

- Reflect upon work challenges.
- Document conference goals.
- Write down their questions.
- Capture new ideas.
- Collect contact information.

An attendee event app, or workbook, can serve this purpose. In your pre-conference emails, encourage attendees to start thinking about their challenges, goals, and questions.

Once they're on site, invite them to visit strategically placed kiosks—perhaps near registration or the opening session ballroom—where they can scan their badge and receive content that helps them capture ideas, organize their thoughts, and plan next steps.

Revamp session agendas. Instruct all speakers to schedule time at the end of each session for attendees to think about next steps for applying new information, identifying unanswered questions, and exchanging contact information with

tablemates. Remind attendees to capture their ideas and plans in the attendee event app.

During the closing session, give attendees time to reflect and map out next steps, in case they haven't done so already. Let them know the type of content you will share post-show to help them maximize their event experience. For example, with the right event technology, you could send them a Digital Memory Bank - a personalized microsite that include a summary of all their digital interactions during the event (i.e. photos taken, content downloads, calls to action, exhibitors they visited, etc.)

#8. Help Attendees Take Action

Attendees have good intentions, but they need a little motivation and inspiration to transform those intentions into action. Your event will have a reputation like no other if you can help attendees implement the great ideas and plans they came up with during the conference.

Invite attendees to opt-in to accountability reminders and notifications about resources related to the sessions they attended. Develop and schedule an email campaign that encourages attendees to revisit their conference notes, attendee event app, or microsite.

Remind them about session slides, handouts, and recordings. Encourage them to make connections (on LinkedIn and your online community) with the people they met at the conference.

Provide prompts to help them reflect on what they learned and how that information can help them at work. Ask about their plans to take action based on something they learned at the conference. Check in with them after a few months to see if their experience would make a good testimonial for next year's marketing.

#9. Encourage Attendees to Share Their New Knowledge

Suggest ways that attendees can share new information and ideas with their co-workers. For example, provide a guide for leading a lunch-and-learn or coffee break briefing. Remind them that their company will receive more ROI from their attendance if they spread this "wealth" around.

Review your registration reports and identify member companies that are sending multiple employees to the conference. Would they be interested in reserving a complimentary meeting room during the event where they can discuss takeaways at the end of each day?

Think of ways you can help the company get the most of the conference so they'll see it's worth their time and money to send even more employees next year.

#10. Leverage Your Event Data

Review attendance reports based on data from your scanning technology or head counts to find out which sessions were the most popular. Ask volunteers to lead online community discussions on some of those popular session topics.

Schedule follow-up education, such as recap webinars, deeper dive webinars, virtual roundtables, and virtual book club meetings on books related to keynotes and sessions.

Invite attendees to form accountability groups with those they met at their sessions. If they express interest, you could get their permission to share the session attendance list—another scenario where scanning technology plays a useful role.

If you use tracking or scanning technology, like badges with QR codes or Near Field Communication (NFC) powered chips, you'll know which sessions each person attended. After the conference, you can market relevant programs to attendees: "Since you attended session X, you might also be interested in online learning program Y."

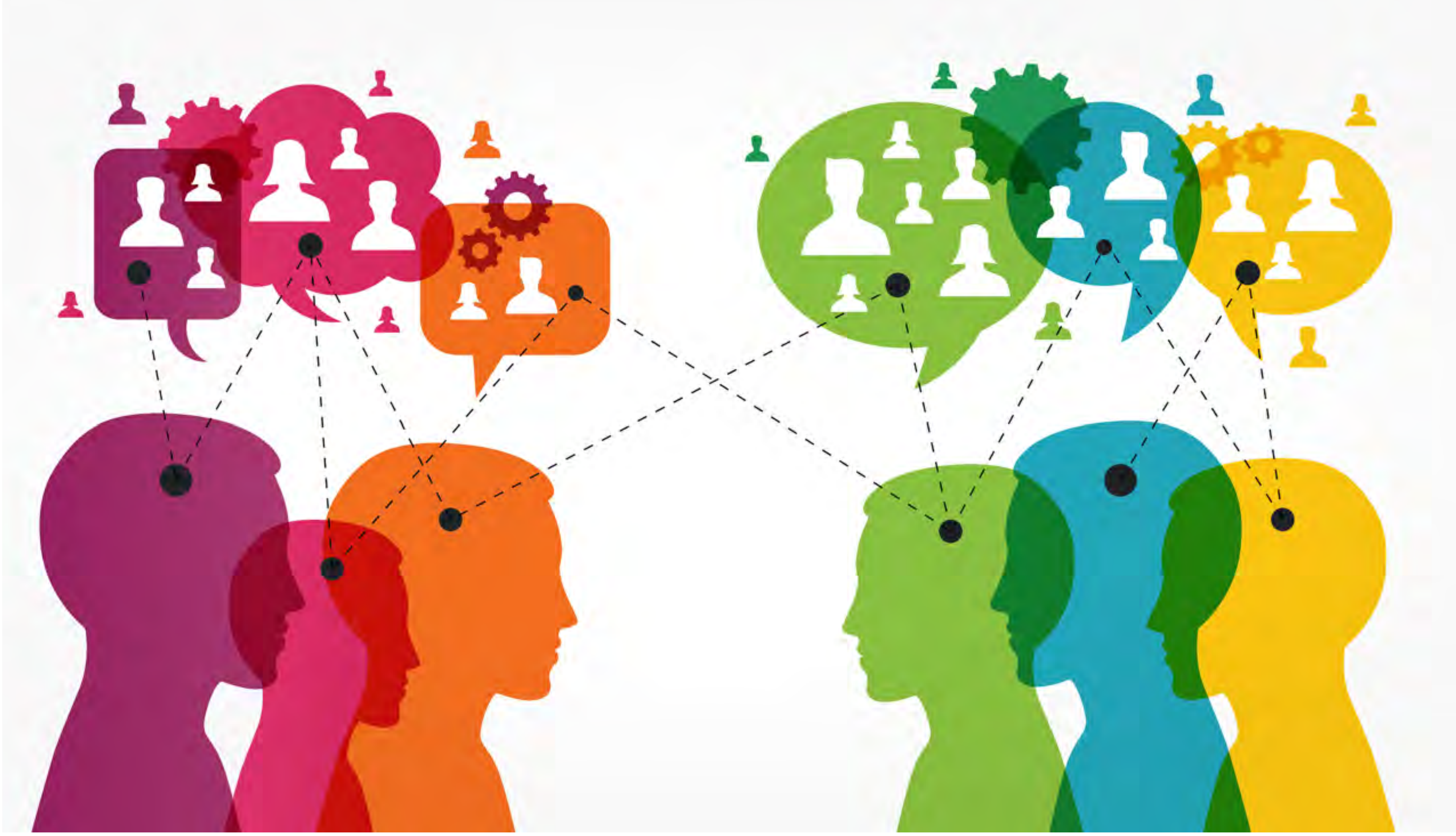
#11. Ask for Post-Conference Feedback

Traditionally, attendees are asked to fill out evaluations either on site or immediately after the event. But the test of whether a conference provided a real ROI for them is several months after the event

- Are attendees applying what they learned?
- Have they expanded their network?
- What do they still need assistance with?
- What would have helped them get more out of the conference?.

Few organizations follow up months after the event. If you do, attendees will see that you understand the challenges they face after a conference.

By providing post-conference learning and networking opportunities, you help attendees have a better chance of retaining and applying new information, and expanding their professional network.



CONCLUSION:

Focusing on meeting and exceeding attendees' needs and expectations before, during, and after your events is critical to achieving your organization's current and future event goals.

It's not only the information they take back to work that matters. It's the connections, knowledge, relaxation, fun, inspiration, and that intangible something—the experience.

Having the right event technology is the key to enable your organization to meet expectations throughout the attendee journey and offer a great and memorable experience.

We'd love to show you how our event technology can help you maximize the attendee experience. Contact us to get started.

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