

# Adventures in Developing a New Meeting

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*Marketing Fast Facts*, May 2001

The relationship between association marketers and meetings and convention staff often is interesting. Even with a centralized marketing department, the importance of conference-generated revenue and the nature of conference marketing materials may actually mean less involvement by the marketing department. But the rules for developing a new conference are different.

Marketing is critical for a first-time meeting; it can determine the audience, assess the meeting's feasibility, promote the event, and evaluate the results. (See related sidebar, "[Marketing Dimensions of Established Versus New Conferences.](#)")

## Conducting a feasibility assessment

When evaluating and developing a new meeting, it often makes sense to involve marketing up front in a structured feasibility assessment. Criteria should include

- competition,
- appeal of possible features,
- ability to attract new audiences,
- timeliness,
- value/willingness to pay, and
- feedback on the format (the daily schedule and what components to include).

## Determining audience needs

Surveys and board votes are fine for determining interest and popular support where it counts. But before launching a new meeting, you also need to know how an audience will receive your new event. Quantitative research is subject to bias and difficult to project reliably to your overall audience, especially regarding something with which they are unfamiliar.

Focus groups often are more compelling, as they offer the chance for give-and-take. A good focus group will help you understand

- which features to include--product development,
- the value proposition--price,
- logistical concerns--place, and
- how and to whom the event should be promoted.

When we conducted focus groups for the first time, it was like a dam breaking. We recommended first-timer discounts, and the member committee charged with the final decision believed so strongly in the product that it provided free registrations for first-timer attendees on the honor system. What turned out to be good for long-term business was a disaster for the first year--not something most meeting planners or CEOs look kindly upon.

## Finding revenue sources

The new meeting concept needs to achieve a balance among traditional sources of revenue. Because most meetings require a mix of attendance fees, sponsorships, and exhibitor revenue, they need to demonstrate sufficient appeal to these diverse audiences.

One meeting I inherited was underperforming because it relied only on attendees for revenue. Once we shifted from token sponsorships to a full-fledged exhibit hall--a painstaking two-year process over the initial objection of our member planning committee--the meeting doubled in size and attendance tripled.

Below a certain size, "the more the merrier" is a rule--you need to generate scale and people to increase the likelihood of learning and networking.

## Choosing a location

Often, facilities and location are seen purely as a meetings function, but marketing must be considered even more in the first year of operation.

Attendance is cost-elastic. An event that costs 20 percent more to attend, including travel, lodging, and registration fees, is likely to lose 20 percent of its audience that year. Sometimes to offset costs, you need a central location. Pinpoint your proposed site on a map, and draw a circle around it in a 250-mile radius. If the circle includes a lot of blue, as is the case with coastal sites, you already lose a portion of your audience.

## Managing expectations

Often, members feed into the brand that you've developed. Do you generally deliver interactive experiences? Vibrant trade shows in exciting locations? Retreat environments where you expect 60 percent of attendees to depart for golf? Knowing the behavior of a typical attendee is critical.

## Planning for the future

Meeting planners generally miss the most important variable in building a new event--recidivism. A membership manager would notice overnight if only 30 percent of an audience re-upped the next year, but most meeting planners look at aggregate attendance rather than the number and profile of attendees who return every year.

Research is an important tool for distinguishing between the strategic answer and the behavior. What people say and do are two different things, but that shouldn't keep you from learning everything you can from attendees in the event's first year. There are four research methods for determining the success of your marketing efforts.

### 1. Evaluations.

- How did they first learn of the event?
- With how many colleagues did they attend?
- Were they happy, taking into account what they expected, and will they probably attend again?
- What else do they attend of your meetings and others' meetings?

Often, on-site surveys focus on the quality of speakers. This is useful in demonstrating responsiveness, but useless given that you probably don't recycle your speakers. It also fails to translate the 30 minutes of attendee attention into feedback that affects your decisions.

### 2. Test marketing.

- How many attendees are local?
- What was the timing of their registrations?
- How many responded to your price promotions?
- What was the conversion rate for inquiries?

Measure every variable that depended on your marketing to better match your promotion to the mindset and decision cycle of your audience.

**3. Non-attendee surveys.** Who meant to come, and probably will next year, but didn't this year? Understanding the audience size for a new event and the impediments that prevented some from attending the first year will aid in planning the location, format, and marketing for next year.

**4. Focus groups or on-site interviews.** Sure, they're a biased sample--they're your best customers. Learning on-site, candidly, what the early adopters think gives you a sneak preview of the word of mouth that will spread about your event, beyond your control and generally beyond your ability to measure. Don't reach for kudos; rather, dig for the dirt to find potential improvements.