

Keep ‘Em Coming Back for More

“Again? But didn’t you go last year, Daddy?”
An annual question around home from my 11-year-old daughter

By David Gouthro, CSP

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hy do people become “repeat attendees” at the same conference year after year? I polled a number of colleagues who’ve been attending the same conference for at least 10 years to see if I could discover an answer.

Before going further, it is important to understand that what draws people to an annual conference in the first place is generally not what keeps them coming back for 10 years or more. The challenge for a meeting planner is to provide a balance between what attracts folks in the first place and what keeps them returning, year after year. In this article, I’m going to focus on the latter.

The folks I interviewed:

- are serial attendees of the same conference;
- choose to attend (they are not required to be there by their clients or employers);
- pay for their own travel, accommodation and conference expenses (in most cases);
- are generally well-respected in their field;
- are very bright, talented and, I dare say, charming!

WHY DO THEY ATTEND YEAR AFTER YEAR?

The three primary reasons are: reconnecting with peers and colleagues; keeping up with new advancements in their field; and investing time to pause and reflect on their business.

Reconnecting with friends, colleagues and peers is the most frequently mentioned reason. You are more likely to find this group of attendees chatting with each other in the hall-

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ways than in sessions. In this fast-paced world, it is almost impossible to stay in regular contact with one’s colleagues and peers. The best time and most cost-effective way to do so is to attend a conference at which those colleagues are likely to make an appearance. For this reason, respondents place a high priority on attending, often turning down business so they can do so. Their decision to attend is usually independent of the location or content of the conference. Rather, it is all about re-establishing valued relationships. If the people they wish to see choose not to attend, the excitement around the event is substantially diminished, and “irrelevant content” becomes a common source of complaint, regardless of the truth of that statement.

For others, content is the main reason for attending, year after year. Professional development is the driver; they thoroughly review the conference brochure before making a decision. They look primarily for new content, credible presenters and a rich learning experience in order to justify their investment. Several say that just one good idea, well imple-

mented, can make the whole conference worthwhile. If you want to locate these folks, just borrow their conference program and photocopy the overview page that has the sessions they plan to attend clearly circled!

The third-most frequent reason mentioned is to carve out an opportunity to get away from the routine of everyday work. They wish to have peace and quiet to work on their business, rather than in it. It is a chance to review, reflect and recommit. The conference provides a convenient venue and environment to do so. They will show up for most of the social events, yet spend a great deal of time in solitude between parties and hospitality suites.

HOW TO ATTRACT “REPEAT ATTENDERS”

Provide formal time and space for connecting and networking. Ensure that coffee/tea, etc. are available all the time, not just at formal breaks (a bit more expensive, but much appreciated). When possible, use venues with lots of nooks and crannies for chance encounters (if you can’t find them at your venue, be creative and make some). Schedule longer breaks (30–45 minutes), so participants can engage in rich, random conversations.

Do not schedule speakers until lunch is completely and formally over. Folks get really annoyed when their lunch time conversations are interrupted for an awards ceremony or a presentation by a “special guest” who could only make it for lunch.

Specify the benefits of seeing friends, colleagues and peers as a compelling reason to attend in all promotional materials. Consider large group designs/formats to explore critical content areas (World Café, Open Space, etc.).

Request that speakers provide time for audience interaction in their sessions. Serial attendees get juiced by discussing new and intriguing content with their colleagues while attending workshops. It seems the longer a person attends the same conference, the less willing they are to sit quietly while listening only to the sage on the stage. They want to give almost more than they wish to receive, while attending conferences.

By demonstrating a greater understanding of what brings people back, year after year, the likelihood of that happening is practically guaranteed!

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