

FROM TRADITIONAL TO TRANSFORMATIONAL: EVENT DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR PROFITABLE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCES

Why is change needed for your conferences to be successful?



There are four key trends conference attendees are looking for you to address in the design and delivery of your conference. In this article, we'll address each of the trends and I'll provide concepts on how you can innovate your conference design to address them.

Because the world has changed, and with it, your attendees. Their expectations are different, along with the factors that influence their decision to attend your event or someone else's. Change is needed for you to not only maximise the profitability of your conferences, but to also capture and retain your attendees year after year.



Trend 1: From Networking To Meaningful connections

It's no longer enough to run a networking function and expect your attendees to mingle with each other to create their own connections. Your event design needs to foster or create ways for meaningful connections to occur naturally.

Ways to create avenues for meaningful connections to take place:

Create places within spaces

Move from catering stations to lolly walls, pantry stations and all-day grazing stations to allow attendees to meet at all times, not just during designated breaks.

EVENTS ARE MORE THAN TOURISM, WE ARE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

- Provide game stations in the exhibition area or foyers such as chess, connect four, scrabble.
- Build an ice-cream parlour as one of your catering stations.

Immersive and activated learning

- Look at taking your attendees to different locations to learn.
- Have attendees move within sessions.
- Encourage your presenters to add interactive components to their presentations that actively have attendees connecting.

Reasons to connect

- Introduce a socially sustainable activity where attendees with similar values can connect i.e. solar buddies.
- Build a first timers buddy program to help those attending for the first time connect with more seasoned attendees.
- Create a library in your exhibition area or foyer and ask attendees to bring a book that is important to them.

Ask them to put a note in the book sharing why it's important. This provides a place for attendees to find time out and get to know other attendees.

Natural conversation starters

- All of the above help conversations start naturally over shared experiences, shared likes and shared values.

EVENTS BRING BRILLIANT MINDS TOGETHER THAT CHANGE THE WORLD.

Trend 2: Transformational experiences

The pandemic taught us a few key things:

- It's easy to access a wealth of learning from our own homes.
- We value being home and having time with our loved ones and being in our own environments.
- Travel, whilst fun, comes at a cost both financially and energetically.

If you want to entice attendees to travel to attend your conference, you must create experiences that cannot be replicated in the virtual environment.

Your event must be worth it. A transformational experience is one that leaves your attendee changed in both an epistemic and personal way. In addition to providing outstanding content, your event needs to be personally appealing.

Data is paramount to creating transformational experiences as it allows you to personalise your program in ways you've not had to do in the past.

Other ways you can create transformational experiences are through:

- Legacy and impact programs
- Wellness programs
- Social programs and giving back
- Immersive education
- Inclusivity



Trend 4: Sustainability

In event design, we refer to three pillars of sustainability:

- Environmental
- Social
- Financial

How you incorporate each of these into your event design can influence a person's decision to attend your event.

Trend 3: Attention deficit

We're all used to multi-tasking. Depending on where you were located during the pandemic, you may have been working full time, managing home schooling, supporting elderly and/or isolated neighbours and family, all while trying to keep your own mental health and wellbeing in check.

We have watches and devices that tell us when we've been still for too long and are more conscious than ever how valuable our time is. Adults learn differently and require variation to maintain stimulation and attention.

The article by Western Governors University shares some great insights into adult learning. A few ways you can address attention deficit through innovative event design are:

- Provide ways for attendees to actively participate in the learning.
- Offer a variety of session lengths.
- Create silent activation stations in the back of your session rooms.
- Fully engage the senses of your attendees through not only learning tools but also through room design and layouts.
- Move away from designated morning and afternoon tea breaks and allow attendees to self-manage their attention.

How have you addressed these three pillars in your event design? It's not enough to switch to bamboo cutlery and catering items, you need to look at how you're influencing sustainability in all its forms.

Additionally, you need to consider how you're reporting this back to your conference attendees. Closing the loop allows an attendee to know how they've made a positive impact simply by choosing to attend your event.

Western Governors University - <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/adult-learning-theories-principles2004.html#close>

