



Unconventional Inspiration

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Spicing up meetings with outdoor activities and indoor apps

By
Renee Brincks

Last March, 5,000 attendees arrived in Portland for an Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) conference. Among the event's 300 networking and professional development sessions, participants unwound with free yoga classes, sampled local food truck fare, joined conference-wide book club discussions and made smoothies with bicycle-generated power. Some brought garments for a Portland charity that distributes prom dresses to students in need. Others lunched with like-minded individuals at tables organized around personal interests such as running, knitting, *Downton Abbey* and *Doctor Who*.

The most popular ancillary activity at the conference was a free headshot lounge. After a brief makeup consultation, attendees sat down for profes-

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COURTESY ACRL



sional photos. They walked away with print and digital images ready to plug into social media profiles, websites, CVs and other work-related publications.

"The headshot lounge was huge," says ACRL Conference Supervisor Tory Ondrta. "We offered something of great value, and something unique that people might not have the money or time for."

Welcome to the modern convention, where food truck roundups replace sit-down dinners and networking takes place during personal photography sessions. Today's conference attendees expect more than just slide presentations and standard receptions. Still, Ondrta emphasizes, it's about both style and substance. She positioned that Portland headshot lounge next to another popular conference attraction: a career center offering complimentary resume reviews, job search advice and mock interviews. Some participants completed real interviews with visiting hiring managers, too.

In this new convention environment, organizers strive to provide professional development opportunities as well as meaningful social interactions.

"Everybody likes free parties and free items, but we're not just blowing our budget on something fun," Ondrta says. "There has to be intrinsic value



MATT HAGE

Event planners are incorporating many strategies to enliven meetings, ranging from outdoor activities such as river rafting and glacier touring, to indoor enhancements such as portrait booths and high-tech apps that allow participants to find and rate presentations digitally.

for the attendee."

For the next ACRL gathering, Ondrta's team is exploring enhancements that range from therapy animals to foot massages to a quiet room where introverts can rest in hammocks and recover from communication overload.

"We're so busy and inundated with information these days. A conference is a chance to escape from your routine and try something new. It's a time to calm down for a bit. It's a chance to assess where you are in your professional life, and maybe even in your personal life," says Ondrta.

"Across all industries, people are taking on much more responsibility in their roles. Attendees want to maximize their time out of the office, and planners are focusing on how they can best engage those



COURTESY, SPECIALTY COFFEE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Barista competitions are popular (and germane) elements of the annual Specialty Coffee Association of America convention in Seattle.

host of new facets for organizers. Attendees now often view conference schedules, appointments, maps, contact details and general destination information on smartphones and tablets. They're also using apps to check into hotels, connect via social media and complete surveys about individual events.

"Planners are using mobile technologies not only for the meeting itself, but also to analyze attendee behavior and create better programming for conferences and meetings," says Marcial.

When the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) met in Seattle last April, attendees accessed educational content, social event updates and maps showing how to find member cafes through the organization's app. SCAA Senior Director of Events Cindy Cohn says the app's adoption rate has been growing steadily since it was introduced, from 22 percent of attendees in 2012, to 35 percent logging in at the 2015 conference.

"It's been said that only millennials and members of younger generations are really into technology, but we see adoption across all ages. The goal is to find the best ways to interact with your particular audience," adds MPI's Matthew Marcial.

When it comes to engaging audiences and restructuring classic convention agendas, some of the best opportunities come when organizers capitalize on a destination's unique character. The Specialty Coffee Association of America signed a multi-year contract with its Seattle venue in part because there are so many activities within a walkable area.

"Our exhibitors, sponsors and attendees come because they enjoy our show, but they're also enjoying the city," says Cohn. "There's an amazing food and beverage scene. There are tons of great clubs and bars. There's the Space Needle, Chihuly Garden and Glass, Pike Place Market and other venues that we don't necessarily take people to, but that they visit on their own."

Of course, Seattle's coffee culture also makes the city a good fit for SCAA meetings. In addition to participating in trade show events and educational sessions, attendees of the most recent conference toured coffee shops in the Capitol Hill, Fremont, Ballard and Georgetown neighborhoods. They visited roasting facilities, equipment manufacturers and local craft breweries. About 400 baristas and coffee connoisseurs attended a two-day pre-confer-

attendees," agrees Matthew Marcial, senior director of events for Meeting Professionals International (MPI), the meeting planners' trade group.

He lists an interest in health and wellness activities as one trend reshaping traditional event agendas. Many planners and venues now incorporate sunrise fitness sessions, yoga breaks and nutritious snacks into their daily offerings. At Ventana Big Sur, on the central California coast, teams take part in meditation, visualization and hiking activities

designed to spur creativity and strengthen connections. San Diego's Paradise Point Resort & Spa offers paddleboard yoga and beachfront nature walks; similarly, the Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach Resort & Spa gets groups outdoors with beach cruiser scavenger hunts. Meeting attendees at Alaska's Alyeska Resort can take part in heli-ski outings

in the winter, or schedule summer sea kayaking trips in nearby Prince William Sound.

The desire to make a positive impact also flavors conference planning. Many companies and organizations give back to their host cities through clothing drives, donations and volunteer work. In fact, an MPI industry report released last summer notes that 36 percent of respondents are engaging their meeting attendees in volunteer projects at the site of their events.

Meeting logistics are becoming increasingly digital, too, a technological migration that opens up a

An app for your room



Like meeting and event planners, venues are using technology to share information and streamline the guest experience. The Four Seasons hotel group introduced a mobile app last summer that lets guests make reservations, check in and out of a room, book airport transfers and coordinate luggage assistance. Users can order room service and book spa and dining appointments, or customize their experience by scheduling turndown services and requesting extra pillows, toiletries and other amenities. The app folds in concierge recommendations as well, with local shopping, dining, cultural and recreational suggestions that link to maps and itinerary-building tools.

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ence gathering at Benaroya Hall; another 2,000 walked from the Washington State Convention Center to Capitol Hill for an opening night block party. Event exhibitors hosted competitions and parties at conference hotels and off-site venues, and 5- and 10-kilometer charitable runs associated with the SCAA gathering raised \$23,000 for nonprofits.

"With a city like Seattle, there's so much to do. We don't have to work too hard to imagine a program that takes people outside, and people do want to get outside," Cohn says.

That's also the case with events in

"If a meeting doesn't have that 'wow' factor, or some way to keep people engaged and entertained, you're going to lose them very quickly to their smartphones and socializing."

Alaska, where many venues and activities showcase the state's natural splendor. Pike's Waterfront Lodge in Fairbanks has banquet rooms overlooking the Chena River. The Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center in Anchorage features floor-to-ceiling windows and Chugach Mountain views.

A successful gathering, however, requires more than great views. The Last Frontier is a perfect locale for outdoor activities to spice up a gathering.

"If a meeting doesn't have that 'wow' factor, or some way to keep people engaged and entertained, you're going to lose them very quickly to their smartphones and socializing," says Toni Walker, president of Logistics, LLC.

When Walker organizes meetings and events in Alaska, she may kick things off



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A sightseeing cruise to visit glaciers, and watch wildlife such as whales, is a popular activity for convention-goers who come to Alaska.

with demonstrations by world-famous woodworkers or ice

carvers. Other times, she arranges appearances by dog mushers and their canine teams, or invites raptor experts to bring birds into a venue. She's also set up outdoor team-building activities centered around recreation such as river rafting.

Last summer, Walker coordinated a dinner event that took 800 meeting attendees from Anchorage to Whittier along the shores of Prince William Sound. As they drove the scenic stretch of shore along Turnagain Arm, group members watched for moose, eagles and whales. Once they arrived in Whittier, they boarded four boats that departed for a three-hour glacier cruise.

"Groups want to do something that's fun and unique and outside the ballroom or meeting space," Walker says. "That dinner cruise was a sold-out event."

Association of College & Research Libraries Conference Supervisor Tory Ondrla believes these rich experiences are the new normal, and she calls it good news for attendees and organizations.

"Expectations are higher, but it's rewarding to give people a more meaningful experience," she says. "That brings more people to your conference, and it gets people engaged in your group and what you're trying to accomplish." **m**

Renee Brincks is based in San Francisco.

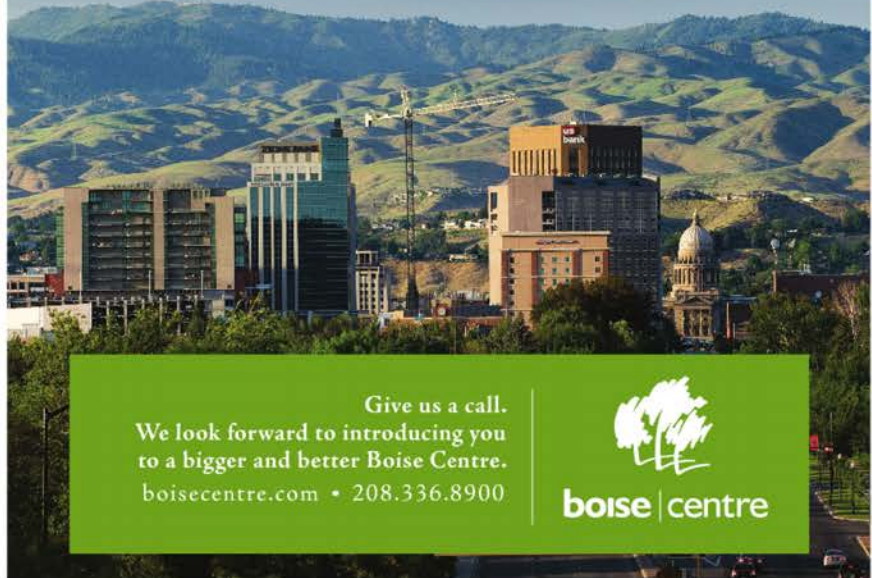


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