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Reinventing Conferences

By Susan J. Ellis

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I participate in upwards of thirty national or regional conferences a year in the United States and abroad. For some time now I have been vaguely dissatisfied at the repetitive format of professional conferences, both as a speaker and as a registrant. These gatherings have a "sameness" that is increasingly feeling dull. My experience last week at the IAVE World Volunteer Conference left me determined to explore new ways to structure meaningful interaction within large groups of diverse strangers sharing a common cause but not knowing enough about each other to move forward without help -- add multiple languages and the difficulty compounds.

Because of the Internet and perhaps also because the field of volunteerism is maturing, conferences that focus on "show and tell" are no longer enough. Yes, we all want to learn about the successes of others, but we are ready to go beyond "what" is being done to the more important questions of "how" and even "why."

Challenges Faced by Conference Planners

1. *Large plenary sessions* are important to set the tone for the conference and convey important information to everyone at once. But they are impersonal gatherings, rarely fostering interaction among audience members. In addition, because the keynoter is selected for name recognition (to draw registrants), the speech may be slightly or hugely off-subject. In the volunteer field, you can always distinguish the prepared speaker from the "dabbler" by whether or not s/he refers to those of us in the audience as "volunteers like you," rather than as leaders or coordinators of volunteer efforts!

2. *Crammed schedules* (a particular problem it seems for our field) allow little breathing space, let alone time for meaningful conversations.

3. *Workshops, often overcrowded, that offer varying degrees of participant interaction.* At their worst, workshops are led by speakers reading academic papers to the group or by panels of "experts" each given only a few moments to share their brilliance before moving on to the next speaker. In

international events, there is the problem of how to translate sessions not located in the main auditorium with the interpreting equipment.

4. *Special events that are noisy and distracting*--even physically uncomfortable as people juggle plates of food standing up (and standing in long lines).

5. *Banquets that feel like a second cousin's wedding*: trapped with whoever lands at your table; generally mediocre food; and constant interruptions from the front of the room.

6. As really large events are forced into multiple housing sites, *conferees are scattered around the host city*, losing their connection to the conference once they depart the site for their lodgings.

OK. We've all "been there, done that." So what can we do differently? I am sincerely hoping to start a dialogue about what you like that works at conferences. Here are some of the areas that could use some new approaches. Then read my starter set of ideas and please share your own!

Pre-Conference Interaction

- What would conferees like to know before arriving on site that would help them to "hit the ground running"?
- Could conferees be asked to complete some survey forms before arrival that could then be posted or shared in some way?
- How can a conference Web site be utilized to encourage advance interaction?

Registration and Name Tags

- What could happen at the registration area to help strangers meet each other right away?
- Despite the fact that everyone knows name tags need to be large enough to see names at a distance, how often have you been frustrated by small print? But how else can name tags be useful in fostering interaction?

Plenary Sessions

- What can be done to counteract the impersonal nature of a large room?
- How can people be encouraged to meet one another?
- What can a keynote speaker do to make a presentation memorable?

Workshops

- How can workshops become more interactive?
- What alternative learning methods might be used at conferences?
- How do we juggle the needs of newcomers with the needs of experienced people?

Site Visits

- What makes a site visit meaningful?
- How can these opportunities be expanded in some way?

Special Events and Breaks

- How do we make sure people meet each other and don't simply spend time with people they knew before they arrived?
- What can be done to make breaks revitalizing?
- If people are lodged at various hotels, what could be done at each hotel to foster the spirit of the conference and give ways to interact?

Exhibit Areas

- What can we do to make more people visit--and use--the exhibit area?
- What would encourage more interaction?
- Other than making computers available for Internet browsing (a great first step, of course), how can a computer area be made more useful to conferees?

Post Conference

- How can we help conferees to take what they learned back home?
- What alternatives are there to printed "proceedings"?

Other

- What haven't we even thought of yet that would make conferencing more exciting and useful?

Here is my starter set of ideas, what are yours?

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Submitted by Joyce Conner, Volunteer Resources Mgr., City of Kettering, Ohio

I like site visits--maybe just because it gets me out of the hotel--but mostly because it is usually a small group with similar interests. I like high-energy speakers who know their audience as well as their subject. I go to a conference to learn what's new, the latest trends and to visit with my colleagues. As we all know, sometimes we learn the most very informally--maybe even from a comment heard in the elevator--so some of the ideas mentioned for informal groups might work.

Submitted by Jon Hall, Association Manager, Alberta/Canada

Like Susan I present at or attend a lot of conferences. I am amazed at the lack of professionalism of some presenters who hand out sloppy materials or simply lecture to participants. My sessions usually elicit a strong respopnse with lots of good comments. I try to do three things in each of my sessions to ensure that everyone gets the most out of the session. I try to have a visually exciting presentation usually using Powerpoint or strong overheads. I give handouts of all the materials including the PowerPoint slides. I arrange for small group discussions as a bonus I try to add content as well. This ensures that participants can enjoy the session, take the message home in a complete form and get to talk about the ideas while they are fresh. This will lock the info in while helping to expand the limits of the speakers. I am sure that if more presenters did this the conferences would all be better.

Submitted by Jan Davison, Volunteer Ohio Board Member, Ohio

Thanks for the tips! I share many of your views. I'm on the steering committee for a statewide conference in Ohio on Service, Learning & Volunteerism (titled Forging New Links) and plan to send copies of this article to the members.

Submitted by Steve Barsky, President, Harrison Promotions, Penna

On name tags: As an exhibitor at ICVA and other conferences, it would be helpful to be able to identify people quickly and easily. This means printing the names as large as possible. Color-coding the badges would also help exhibitors to identify novices, veterans, those in specific employment arenas, etc. Can't help but think that these ideas would also be good for participants.

Submitted by Judy Brandenburgh, President; Nebraska Organization of Volunteer Leaders, NE

I like conferences where they have a central theme or logo to pull everything together. Just using the same graphic for each handout, nametag, poster, whatever helps 'centralize' stuff. Nametags are a hot subject also. Boring nametags get little attention, but exciting ones, tend to get people's attention and get them talking to each other. Also they make great souvenirs to take back home. I have been on the planning side of many conferences as well as an attendee, and the importance of having speakers or 'experts' available on your topics is more important than having to sit and listen to a speaker that is talking about a subject of little value to you.

Submitted by Andy Fryar, Executive Officer - Lyell McEwin Health Service Volunteers Inc / Director - Volunteering Australia, South Australia

I enjoyed the IAVE conference in Edmonton and think that the organizers did a wonderful job. I have however found at many conferences that the description of the workshops often do not match the contents of the same. I believe that a good way to overcome this would be to develop a coding system

which clearly identifies the target audience for each workshop - e.g., blue = *for volunteers*, green = *for 'newer' volunteer managers (the basics)*, red = *more advanced material for volunteer managers who have been involved in the field for some time.* This may alleviate the all too common mix-ups which tend to occur.

I also like the idea of having a workshop session which involves participants from various sectors (ie. health, emergency services, recreation etc), but which are only very loosely structured - enabling participants from the sector to meet others and identify issues pertinent to that particular sector of volunteer management.

Submitted by Putnam Barber, President, The Evergreen State Society, Washington, USA

Things I've seen work:

- Asking people to state in advance a problem or issue they want to talk about, then labeling tables at meals with signs that select some of the more prevalent topics mentioned.
- Leaving one time-slot late in the conference open to be used for scheduling ad hoc poster sessions, panel discussions, round-tables, etc., during the conference itself. (The conference planners have to be ready with a transparent system for getting suggestions and a practical way of deciding on and distributing the session line-up.)
- And .....please!...... peace and quiet during receptions. I don't know where the idea that there should be music, and even worse, a humiliatingly ignored "program", during such events comes from. It should be sent back!

Submitted by Traci Hughes, Community Outreach Specialist, Denton County Children's Advocacy Center, Lewisville, Texas, USA

I think the reason so many of the conferences are so "generic" is because the turn-over rate is so high in our field. I would like to see the conferences rate their courses, such as Fundraising ideas 101, for the how to have a fundraiser; then Fundraising ideas 201, for those who know how to hold a function but need to brainstorm on ideas and share what has worked in the past.

When I was new to the field of volunteerism, the 101 classes were most important, so I don't want to see the basics die out. However, you tend to not attend these seminars when only the basics are being taught and there's no room to expand and grow. We need to find a way to allow the long term professionals a way to expand and grow within their own environments.

Also, have classes within these seminars that allow round table discussions for people to exchange ideas. If you are in need of the more experienced to teach courses, have them lead discussions. For example, "What has worked for your organization in the area of job duties for volunteers?" or "What fundraisers have worked?", etc. Then the creativity can really be allowed to flow and ideas will

develop. This will cause more interaction within the seminars and allow people to meet each other and network before and after the "class".

Submitted by Tom Rinkoski, Bay Area Managers of Volunteer Services, Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA

We have been experimenting with conference formats with our own local DOVIA Conference which usually brings in about 150 people. This year, instead of having keynote and workshops, we are having one seamless session. The entire conference is led by the same team. We are using the MBTI as a tool, and together are exploring how temperaments affect the three issues of teamwork, recruiting, and conflict management. This conference is scheduled for October 23! Enrollment has been strong, response positive.

Submitted by Sarah Elliston , Professional Development Associate, United Way Volunteer Resource Center , Cincinnati, Ohio (USA)

Well, I have stopped going to many conferences because the workshops are often so basic or don't appear to offer anything new. It seems that opportunities for experienced administrators are confined to the pre-conference sessions, or we are encouraged to teach the workshops for the new people. My company won't pay for those, unfortunately. I miss the interaction and the opportunity to dialogue with other experienced managers but I don't miss the crowds and the lines and the speakers who think we're all volunteers.

One of the best key-note speakers I have heard was at the ICVA in Little Rock, where Jean Houston had us on our feet, singing and dancing, before breakfast. There are few speakers who can match that. She knew who we are better than we did and thus was an inspiration. I like the ideas I have read so far: the pre-conference survey (a web site's a good idea), the name tag identifiers that lead to different groups of people for lunch every day, the idea of keeping the workshops limited to 30 people which means some folks would have to do theirs more than once, perhaps, but it makes for a more fun workshop.

I know we talked at one point about conducting training of trainers for people who want to present at ICVA - I don't know what happened to that suggestion but perhaps the program committee of conferences could contact their local chapters of ASTD and ODN to find presenters who train for a living, who could teach presenters how to do interactive, experiential workshops. Other suggestions: Having food at more than two locations in a room for an evening mixer helps; inviting speakers who come from the Humanistic Education field (Sid Simon, Jack Canfield, Hanoch and Melodie McCarty) will mean the speech will be interactive because those educators don't talk, they teach and that requires that the group participate - I have seen Sid Simon get a room full of 1,000 people up and moving; Buddy systems can be helpful, I've participated in the process for international visitors at ICVA.

Submitted by Susan Sahnow, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon, USA

The IAVE World Volunteer Conference in Edmonton, Canada was certainly well organized and offered a wide variety of sessions and keynote speakers. Although I was in awe as usual with the magnitude of what is being done around the world, I was disappointed not to see the environmental, natural resource and government communities represented in the keynotes or the sessions. By Government I mean volunteer program within local, state, federal, provincial governments. I went away feeling disappointed that I had not met and interacted with a wider diversity of people, particularly from the fields just mentioned.

I did meet some wonderful folks from Edmonton and the surrounding community. The Albertans I met were warm, welcoming and helpful. The following are some suggestions for future conferences.

1. Focus or check in groups. 15-20 people in a group with assigned leader, meet for 45 min-1 hour. Groups are assigned based on a symbol or code on the back of the name tag. Informal atmosphere. Leader has question to get group started or each person in the group takes a minute or two to introduce themselves and how they are connected to volunteers. If scheduled just before lunch the group or parts of the group could go to lunch together. You could put a different code for each day. One day for a diverse group of people, one day for people from the same region or area and one day for people who coordinate or work in similar type volunteer field. I realize with 2,000 or better participants this might be a challenge, but I think it would work.

2. Name tags. List city, state (province) people are from. Maybe list one interesting fact on name tag to intrigue people who read it to ask more.

3. Old idea but works great to self facilitate conversations-Have/want labels. On one label put information you "have" that you could share with others (i.e. 3 new & different ways to recognize volunteers. On other label put information you want (i.e. want to know where I can get good Thai food in this city). Give out at registration.

Submitted by Bobbie D'Addario, Youth Director and Volunteer Coordinator, Denver, CO USA

I agree! Lately I find that I want to sneak out early because there is nothing new or challenging. Perhaps grouping people by the kind of agency or organization they work in would work. I love when I meet someone that I can share ideas with. I think that doing a pre-conference survey would help the coordinators to know where to place people for meals. I find site visits rarely helpful, let me hear about the organization for a few minutes and then if I am interested I'll make a visit. Small groups (no larger than 30) seem to work the best in workshops. I love fun, energetic presenters who know the field.

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