

## meeting management

BY CAROL SCONZERT

# Walk A Mile In Your Attendees' Shoes

*Attendees' changing needs are a show organizer's moving target*



**D**O YOU REMEMBER THE TV COMMERCIAL FROM A FEW years ago about cowboys herding cats? Despite the humorous imagery, there is a grain of truth in this endeavor for event managers, tasked with the responsibility of safely guiding the movements of a large number of people who are in unfamiliar surroundings and are operating under time constraints. What many event managers overlook is a consideration of their attendees' changing needs — from pre-show to on site — as well as their movements throughout the meeting venues. Viewing the visitor's experience in a more holistic manner will require an effort to coordinate many different aspects of your meeting (from the development of the meeting program to on-site signage), but the end result will be a more successful wayfinding experience for your attendees.

Let's examine an attendee's experience (my own) at a recent annual meeting and see what can be improved upon. Remember, the goal is to help attendees orient themselves in their new environment and comfortably find their way. What do they need?

### The correct information in the optimum location at the right time.

- ▶ complete, clear, and consistent terminology
- ▶ information that meets their changing needs over the course of the meeting
- ▶ signage size and placement as well as sight lines when viewed from a crowd taken into account

Here is some of the information provided in advance of the event I attended:

- ▶ Both the association's Web site and advance program guide refer to a resource hub called the "Plaza," which includes registration, an e-mail center, massage station, coffee breaks, speaker services, lounges, student resources, and more. These services grouped together will provide a meeting point between activities for attendees.

- ▶ Sixteen different tracks focus education offerings around clear learning objectives, identified in the front of the advance program guide and on the Web site, along with abbreviations for each track name.
- ▶ Sessions are coded by a numerical system based upon a clear scheme: all of Sunday's classes were numbered in the 100 series, Monday's classes were numbered beginning with 200; Tuesday used the 300s; and Wednesday used 400s.
- ▶ A Program-At-A-Glance page provided a recap of each day's educational and ancillary events so attendees could see the overall flow of activities.

Using the checkpoints above, how did the pre-show communication perform?

- ▶ The Plaza is well-promoted to fulfill a number of tasks in one convenient location ... but where is it? Since this is a temporary feature of the event rather than a permanent fixture in the convention center, the Plaza requires information as to where it is staged. But nowhere on the Web site or in the advance program guide was the location of the Plaza actually provided. In fact, I had selected my hotel based on the incorrect assumption that the Plaza would be located at the headquarters hotel, rather than the convention center.
- ▶ Identification of the Educational Tracks is clear and concise. If the attendee needs to fulfill specific requirements for certification, this information will provide a checklist. Bravo!
- ▶ The day-indexed numbering scheme for the individual sessions provides an adequate amount of information to select my sessions. Good job.
- ▶ I circled my registered events on the Program-At-A-Glance page, and in so doing, revealed the free time in the week which I could either fill in with more activities or plan an off-site outing. This is a great example of how information provided is sometimes used by the attendee to obtain reverse information. How many times do your attendees need to know the opposite of what you are telling them?

DAVID FLAHERTY

### On-site Communication

For their first visit to the hall, all attendees are looking for the registration area to obtain their badges and materials. The first floor ballroom has a sign over the door clearly marked for registration, so the path of travel is quickly and successfully determined. Excellent!

But what about the goals of the attendee for subsequent visits to the center? The attendee's needs become increasingly varied as the event unfolds, and they must be able to quickly find their destinations.

► Am I trying to attend a keynote or session? There is no signage to indicate if session rooms are all on one level or multiple levels. And once it is determined that there are no sessions on the main floor, the visitor is presented with a choice of separate escalators to the second level or the third level. Which one to take? And how much time do I have to re-trace my steps if I choose incorrectly?

► The friendly greeters graciously point me to Level 3 for my sessions, and I hop on the escalator. Once at the top, however, I face a new challenge: Where is my classroom? The billboard facing me lists all of the session names — but without any corresponding room numbers. This is incomplete information.

► I have a choice of pulling out the final program from my bag to look up the session location, or I can wander the halls reading the convention center's individual room signs. Juggling coffee and materials, I dig out the program for guidance. I now need different information than I needed before I arrived: I need a room number. To find it, I must look up the session number, and at this point I discover a potential source of confusion in the program. The three-digit session numbers are too similar to the three-digit room numbers on this floor. In a quick glance I must determine if I need to be in session 207 in room 325, or vice versa, and is the next session 223 in 313, or was that 213 in 323? Aargh! The numbering scheme that functioned well before I got to the facility now suffers in conjunction with another system on site. How about using that Track ID Code as part of an alpha-numeric session code, or using four-digit numbers to better

distinguish sessions from the facility scheme? Even better, how about if the program and signage both provide a key to whatever session code is used?

► I think I know which room I need, so now I simply need to find it. Did I say simply? Where is the sign with a "You Are Here" map of the floor so I can orient myself? Alas, it's in the program that I just buried in my bag, but not on any signage in this lobby. A second locator map at the ground level would have provided me with an advance path before I even got on the escalator, but instead I am digging in the bag again — along with everyone else around me.

This year, the organization hosting this annual meeting utilized RFID attendee badges, and provided informational flyers to dispel misunderstanding of the scope and scale of this new technology. Most attendees that I spoke with did not

express any privacy concerns, however, the technology created new frustration. Specifically, the RFID badges were employed at the e-mail center to authorize access to the Internet. Unfortunately, there was no signage to explain that the badge was a component to the process, so when I approached the computer with my badge pinned to my collar instead of hanging around my neck, I couldn't log on. Neither could the gentleman next to me who was wearing his badge on a lan-

yard, but who happened to be about 6'6" tall, and his badge did not line up to the reader in the base unit. Signage at the computer stations could have instructed us that the badge needed to be within a certain parameter of the work station in order to successfully log on.

To really meet your attendees' needs, you must stay one step ahead of them. Not only must you provide them with the information they will need to navigate your event and make decisions, but you need to convey these messages consistently in all your touch points with them. ■

**To really meet your attendees' needs, you must stay one step ahead of them and provide them with the information they need to navigate your event and make decisions.**



♦♦ **Carol Sconzert** is the principal of Osmosis Creative LLC, a San Francisco design firm specializing in event design, graphics, and wayfinding for show management clients across broad industry sectors. To download the full text of the article above, please visit the Web site at [www.osmosiscreative.com](http://www.osmosiscreative.com) or e-mail [sconz@osmosiscreative.com](mailto:sconz@osmosiscreative.com).