

Anna Keller | American Public Health Association

In February of 2015, MaestroMeetings had the opportunity to converse with Director of Convention Services for the American Health Association, Anna Keller. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

MaestroMeetings: How do you accept, prepare or organize what abstracts or speakers will be featured in your conference?

Anna Keller: We get about 10,000 abstracts submitted online to any one of about 60 different sections, interest groups, caucuses, or disciplines. There's a volunteer program planner assigned to each of those disciplines. That person puts out a call for reviewers. These volunteer reviewers usually come from their membership group. They can set the criteria on what they're looking for, and then they make the decision about which abstracts to accept and which not to accept.

MaestroMeetings: How do you decide how your conference will be scheduled, and how do you decide which speakers will present in which rooms, etc.?

AK: That's pretty much up to the program planners. Because we're very meeting-intensive, we schedule close to 80 sessions concurrently.

We assign each section a certain number of slots. They know before they begin accepting abstracts which slots they have. It's the program planners' role to pull abstracts into sessions and assign those sessions to an existing slot.

We also have more than one format for presentations. There's the typical oral presentation, and we also do a round-table presentation where there's a different speaker at each table and an audience gathers around the table. And then of course, we have poster presentations as well. So an abstract submitter could be assigned to any of those three different formats unless they've specified that they only are interested in a specific one.

MaestroMeetings: What demographic does your event cater to? You are a membership organization, correct?

AK: Yes, we are a membership organization. Public health is really, really broad-based. I would say we have a pretty heavy academic focus. A lot of our members come from schools of public health (both faculty and students). We have quite a few in research and development, public health practice, program development, education, administration and global health. Those are some of our big areas.

MaestroMeetings: The next question is about attrition risk management. So in your hotel contract, what do you do if you don't have enough rooms filled?

AK: We don't have attrition in any of our hotel contracts. I don't know how long they'll allow us to continue doing that, but part of it is that we have more than 25 years of history that is very solid and shows them that we don't have much slippage in our numbers. It would be very unusual for us to lose more than 10 percent of our total block.

MaestroMeetings: Do you have volunteers who help with the conference?

AK: No, on several occasions we've been asked if we could use volunteers onsite to help with either our information desk or to monitor session rooms. We tried it quite a few years ago, and it was just too much for us to handle. We didn't have the administrative staff to manage it and we had volunteers in key positions who didn't show up. As a result of that, we no longer use volunteers onsite. We use paid temp staffing for our onsite needs.

MaestroMeetings: Are you using any new technologies to make your conference more efficient?

AK: We have a mobile app for our annual meeting that's quite popular. We are actually now in the bidding process and looking at other mobile app companies, just to make sure we continue to be on the cutting-edge of that.

We are heavily involved in social media; especially with Twitter and Facebook. We have an annual meeting blog. We also reach out to all attendees through a monthly attendee newsletter. We have a lot of videos from the annual meeting that are immediately uploaded to our YouTube page.

For a number of years, we have also been recording the oral presentations and combining them with the PowerPoint so that you can listen to a presentation, view the PowerPoint and see the movement of the mouse. We try and capture every single presentation, if we can, and we offer the recorded sessions for sale. There hasn't been a lot of buy-in for that product, so we're actually trying something new this year, and that is that we're drastically lowering the price of it and trying to market it a little bit more to see if we can get a whole lot more people using it.

MaestroMeetings: How do you calculate the value of your conference?

AK: We do a post-annual meeting survey using Survey Monkey, and I would say that out of about 11,000 attendees, we get about 1,000 responses. So, not great, but it's a very detailed survey. We definitely go back and look at the results and we share the results with the rest of our association, and we try to make some changes according to the feedback that we get.

MaestroMeetings: Do you have any other new things that you've tried that have worked or haven't worked?

AK: One of the things that we do every year is a "Help Us Help Them" program where we try and give back to a local charity. We were always struggling to get people to donate to that, but more recently, we've seen a lot of increase in that area. And I think part of the reason for that is that we've tried to break down the giving opportunity into smaller amounts reflecting the impact of your gift in concrete terms. So, for five dollars, you support this; for \$10, you're giving this; for \$20, this is the impact of your gift; for \$50, this is the impact of your gift. By doing this graduated break-down and providing some really low-cost opportunities, we've seen a significant increase in giving across the board.

So that's one area that I think has worked pretty well. I think the mobile app has been a great boon for us. Our program is about the size of a telephone book and people really don't like to carry it around, so there's been a lot of success with the mobile app. It's also allowed us to cut down a little bit on the printing of the final program.

MaestroMeetings: Thank you for talking with me, this has been very informative.