

Six Ways to Make Your Conference a Success, from AWP

By Elaina Zachos, Staff Writer at MaestroMeetings

Every year, the Association of Writers & Writing Programs brings people with a passion for literature to their massive Conference & Bookfair. More than 12,000 attendees ranging from high school readers to veteran writers gather in a busy American city – this year, Minneapolis – for four days to hear insightful speeches, network with other language-- lovers and talk about contemporary literature. This year, the conference will feature over 2,000 presenters and 550 readings, panels and lectures, while the Bookfair will host over 700 presses, journals and literary organizations from all over the world.

Abigail Campbell is the Conference Events Manager for AWP and has about four and a half years of experience in planning large conferences. We talked about her techniques in engineering AWP's event and tips on how smaller nonprofits can make their own conferences more successful.

1. Have a big demographic

AWP caters to writers, readers, teachers, students, editors and publishers eighteen and up, Campbell said. AWP isn't a membership organization, so they don't have to count on the same members attending the conference every year. Also, the Bookfair brings in people interested in anything from small presses to book arts, so AWP "really doesn't exclude a lot of people," Campbell said.

2. Open registration early

By the time registration for AWP's event opens up in August, the program committee is creating the conference schedule. Campbell recommends that organizations open conference registration six to nine months ahead of time. At the very least, registration should be opened to exhibitors, presenters and major sponsors, she added. "In today's world, people do need to make sure that they have enough time to plan trips and get them reimbursed and get them approved," Campbell said.

3. Be competitive with your hotel

Dealing with hotels can be stressful and pricey. "Contracting with a hotel takes a lot of experience and a lot of logistic planning. You need to have a background in reading this legal jargon," Campbell added. She recommends that the person negotiating with the hotel be conservative with room blocks and stay attentive of the rooms for the best rate for conference attendees. Organizations should have enough statistics and leverage to effectively bargain with the hotel. Campbell said that "making sure that you're on top of your block and making sure that you're on top of your numbers" is important to effectively bargain with the hotel.

4. Value your volunteers

"Volunteers are an extension of your staff," Campbell said. Attendees look up to them for directions, room changes and so on. "We love our volunteers," she added. AWP waives the registration fee for volunteers if they work at least four hours during the conference, and Campbell is currently trying to initiate a newer volunteer appreciation program to make sure her volunteers know how much AWP appreciates them.

5. Use social media to your advantage

AWP relies heavily on their mobile app and use of Twitter. The app keeps attendees up-to-date on schedule changes and other last-minute alterations, while Twitter helps get all attendees involved in the event and boosts publicity. AWP assigns “tweet seats” at their speaker’s presentations, so whoever sits in these labeled chairs is encouraged to live-tweet the speech. With tweet seats, the attendee gets recognition, the speaker gets tagged and the conference gets publicity. “It’s a very beneficial thing for everyone,” Campbell said. AWP also has a 12-foot by 16-foot “Twitter wall,” which displays tweets with the tag #AWP15 and other related hashtags. Campbell credited the wall to the Associate Director of Conferences, Cynthia Sherman.

6. Follow up with attendees online

Campbell said that the conference app is also helpful in measuring and reporting metrics. With the app, when attendees are returning home from the event, “and they’re super excited – they just left the conference,” the mobile app will give them a survey on their thoughts about the conference. Event metrics and reporting are also good to use to get leverage with sponsors, Campbell said. “In order to get sponsors, in order to get bigger name people [as speakers], we use these metrics.”