

How the AMA Gets Attendees to Participate at their Conferences

By Elaina Zachos, Staff Writer at MaestroMeetings

Gone are the days when conference presenters preach their papers as idle audience members look on in thoughtful silence.

Matt Weingarden, the [American Marketing Association](#)'s program manager, said that in-room participation has increased dramatically at the organization's [Summer](#) and [Winter Marketing Educators' Conferences](#). Recently, he said that participation has shot up from 50 to 75 percent.

"Like any conference, you can't force people to be in the [session] rooms," Weingarden said. "By doing some of these more diverse session styles, we've been able to attract a lot of people into the rooms and keep them in there."

One of the methods that the AMA employs for audience participation is their Part-A, Part-B sessions. By replacing two back-to-back 75-minute sessions with one three-hour session, Part-A, Part-Bs are an intense, focused way to encourage a dialogue between session chairs and conference attendees. For example, where two traditional sessions might start at 8:30 or 10:30 in the morning, a Part-A, Part-B session would replace them and run from 8:30 to 11:30.

"Those have become very popular because they're very, very content-rich. People are really able to dig deeply and it leaves lots and lots of time for questions," Weingarden said.

The session chair who is leading the Part-A, Part-B has the option of allowing a break half-way through the allotted time. But in most cases, the chairs choose not to break up the session because they are content-rich and focused. When conference goers attend these sessions, they know what they're getting into, Weingarden said.

But in the past, the AMA didn't have so much luck in experimenting with new types of sessions.

Previously, the organization tried to crowd-source their sessions, allowing participants to propose sessions onsite and cast votes. Weingarden said that these sessions were unsuccessful because not many people offered sessions, and fewer voted on them.

The AMA tried to modify the session model by encouraging participants to present posters, and then holding a vote to see which poster was the best. After the votes were in, the AMA intended to create small session out of the poster. Again, this modified session model didn't work out.

"In academia, it's a little bit challenging to sort of force people to pick what they think is good research in that kind of public space. It's just not a part of the culture," Weingarden said.

He added that the AMA will probably continue to adapt this session model.

“I think we just have to figure out the best way to make sure that it fits with the culture of the academic community,” Weingarden said.

For any event planner, it’s important to keep a tally of new things that you’ve tried that have helped your conference, but keeping track of your conference failures is just as crucial.

Weingarden said that even if the AMA can’t correct any problems they encounter during their conference, they can remedy issues by changing other aspects of the event. For example, they can create alternative time slots to repeat or record sessions after their initial presentations.

“It solves the problem without creating this nightmare for us of trying to figure out how on earth are we going to reschedule a program,” Weingarden added.

In addition to relying on participants to point out scheduling issues at the conference, the AMA offers a post-event survey to participants for feedback. And in “Town Hall Forums” after the event, the staff meets with key leaders in marketing who have attended other conferences. In a qualitative assessment, the seasoned conference attendees give feedback to the AMA staff about the program.

The AMA also follows up with negative responses on their post-event surveys to get a sense of what’s causing this feedback.

Weingarden said, “Those have been really helpful because in some cases, they were issues that were very solvable, but we just didn’t really think about [them.]”