

How to Get the Most Out of Your Conference Volunteers

By Elaina Zachos, Staff Writer at MaestroMeetings

As an event planner, letting volunteers help manage and organize your conference can make the event run more efficiently. If you employ these workers, you have to make sure they know how much you appreciate their help.

The American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy gets about 30 to 35 volunteers annually, said Melinda Colón, the organization's associate director of governance programs and meetings. Prior to the meeting, the AACP staff hosts a conference call to walk volunteers through the expectations that the conference staff has for them. Once onsite, the AACP staff gives volunteers polo shirts for their participation.

"It makes them feel official [and] they get very excited about it," Colón said. "It also distinguishes them to the speaker."

The names of the AACP volunteers are also printed in the event program and on the conference website. These volunteers are also invited to the President's Reception after the conference.

For the American Marketing Association, most of the content at the Summer and Winter Marketing Educators' Conferences is entirely guided by volunteers, said Program Manager Matt Weingarden.

"These are people who are in the trenches, who are doing the research," Weingarden said. "We've been really lucky to consistently recruit phenomenal volunteers."

The 40 committee-level volunteers acting as track chairs for the AMA conferences receive waived registration fees in exchange for their help. Also, the 100 to 150 volunteers serving as conference co-chairs get free housing as compensation.

The Association of Writers & Writing Programs waives the registration fee for their 125 volunteers, said Abigail Campbell, the organization's conference events manager. The AWP opens volunteer registration to students, recent graduates and adjunct professors. She said that a solid registration and refund policy is important if an organization plans to waive the cost of registration in exchange for help from volunteers.

"Volunteers are an extension of your staff," Campbell said. "Even though it is a beneficial exchange, these people are still helping you and doing a great job."

Campbell said that she always recommends a volunteer recognition program. She said that if she sees volunteers being bubbly and helpful at the registration desk, she gives them coupons for free coffee at the conference concessions.

"We love our volunteers," she added. "And that's great. It's beneficial for both of us."