

How to Get Your Conference Attendees to Connect

By Elaina Zachos, Staff Writer at MaestroMeetings

Today, more than ever, people are [using the internet to connect](#) online through social media and mobile devices, rather than interacting in person. So event planners are adapting, and some organizations are working on ways to get people talking again at their conferences.

The [American Marketing Association](#) encourages its members to interact with each other through membership, national events, local chapters, social media channels and, of course, the annual Summer and Winter Marketing Educators' Conferences. Matt Weingarden, the program manager at the AMA, said that the primary reason why people attend these conferences is to connect with their academic peers.

To facilitate connection, the organization hosts the Women in Marketing Scholars lunch, which officially began three years ago. The Friday before the conference, female attendees are invited to come together at the lunch to connect and build relationships before the conference begins.

"This is a unique way to help folks connect with each other, but it focuses on a population that probably benefits significantly from that chance," Weingarden said.

Weingarden added that since its inception, the luncheon has gone from a 20-person attendance to a 95-person lunch. He said that established, senior male scholars want to get involved in the event to provide support and assistance for female scholars who are younger in their careers. At the February 2015 conference, the event was not limited to women.

In another attempt to get people to connect, the AMA also posts the names and institutions of people who will be attending the conference at least four weeks before each event.

"So that way, at least people are able to start connecting," Weingarden said. "About 85 to 90 percent of people register by our early registration deadline, so it's pretty easy to coordinate when we post that information."

At the conference itself, the AMA hosts networking receptions which are scheduled around other important conference events. Among these receptions, the organization hosts 10 to 15 Special Interest Group receptions to target academics who are interested in sharing ideas, knowledge and experiences with their peers.

The AMA also works to create small networks that focus on particular content, which are led by track chairs and anchored in social media. For example, Weingarden said, in a sales network, the sales track chairs might create a hashtag focusing on their type of network to exchange ideas before the conference starts. So in this scenario, the track chairs have already created a dialogue between conference attendees before the event even began.

But the AMA isn't the only organization that's working hard to connect its attendees.

At the conference for the [American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy](#), the staff instituted a "Recharge & Reconnect" space in 2014 for attendees to socialize in a low-pressure space at their Annual Meeting.

Meeting staff filled the room with comfortable couches and hired masseurs. They offered fruit-infused water and charging stations for people to recharge their phones and laptops.

Melina Colón, the associate director of governance programs and meetings for the organization, said that most AACP members attend to conference to network and learn. She said that the space, cleverly dubbed “R&R,” was popular because it gave attendees some time to relax during the otherwise hectic conference.

“That was gangbusters, everybody loved it,” Colón said. “A lot of [attendees] just take time to catch up on emails.”

The space for R&R was converted from a “Learning Lounge” with educational videos and interactive media. The Learning Lounge only lasted for two years because it was unpopular.

“It really just bombed. Going into a Learning Lounge to watch these videos, it just didn’t appeal to [attendees],” Colón said. “I think a lot of that was that our members really come to interact with each other for meetings.”