

Ron Wasserstein | American Statistical Association

In February of 2015, MaestroMeetings had the opportunity to converse with the Executive Director of American Statistical Association, Ron Wasserstein. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

MaestroMeetings: Tell me a little about the different conferences you run?

Ron Wasserstein: We have a major conference, which is the Joint Statistical Meetings. That serves as our association's annual meeting, as well as a gathering place for statisticians from other societies. We just finished the Conference on Statistical Practice, which is a much smaller meeting. It's entirely an ASA meeting, and then we have a number of meetings that we help our sections with. Sections are like interest groups. And occasionally, on an occasional or periodic basis, we assist other organizations in hosting a meeting of some kind.

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

RW: We have a home-grown abstract and manuscript submission process. It connects to our member management database, which is powered by IMIS. There are a small number of reviewers who decide which papers they'll accept for each category.

MaestroMeetings: How do you register conference-goers once they're onsite for the event?

RW: We encourage advance registration. Advance-registered attendees stand in a very short line where they pick up their conference bag, but they will have already received their nametag and any tickets for special events in the mail. We do have a fair amount of onsite registration; about a fourth of our registrations occur onsite.

MaestroMeetings: Do you have different rates for students and speakers to stay in your convention hotel?

RW: We try to make a range of housing option prices available. The convention hotels typically don't have a lot of flexibility. We negotiate a certain number of rooms for a government rate, but we almost always have some relatively low-cost housing available through some agreement with a campus dormitory since it's a summer conference and dormitories are not in use at that time.

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

RW: Well, we're statisticians, so of course we have a survey. We survey a random sample of participants. We also survey presenters, because we want to see if they're happy with their experience as well. Every session chair submits a little report about the number of attendees, any problems they had, any feedback they have. And of course, at the end of the day, people vote with their feet: We see attendance as a pretty important metric.

MaestroMeetings: The next question is about attrition risk management. What happens if you don't fill the rooms you reserve?

RW: We have specific contractual arrangements regarding room nights. So we monitor that sort of thing very closely, because that's a large problem if you fall way short of room nights. But that's the advantage of having a lot of history. We have been to many of the cities before, so we have a pretty good idea of how many people want to come to conventions in those cities. In the past few years, we've really had the opposite problem that, where in spite of our best guesses, we're scrambling around to find more rooms for people. Which is a happier problem to have in some respects, but the anxiety that it causes for members and for staff, you obviously try to get it as close to good as you can.

We negotiate seven years out with a convention center and a conference hotel. And then, we generally work with housing bureaus to fill in the rest of the demands for room space.

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

RW: So first of all, let me just say that new technology in my answer means things that are relatively new to us, but they may not be new at all, generally speaking. We find ourselves refining our social media strategies when it comes to meetings, and everything else, for that matter.

A few years ago, we started using a content management system at the meetings themselves. So everyone who's making a presentation brings their presentations to a central location, where it's loaded on a server and is available in the room where their presentation will be given at and at the time of day that they will give their presentation so they can access it from the computer in that room. That keeps that thing from happening that used to happen all the time at meetings where everybody's bringing their own laptop or their flash drive up, and then the laptop doesn't plug into the projector and time is wasted.

We're always trying to make it easier for people to know what they want to do at this very complicated meeting, so we're always improving our online program so that you can access the program from your laptop or mobile device. You can save your schedule, you can go through and pick out what sessions you want to go through and save them so you can build your program on your mobile device. That helps for a number of things, not the least of which, is people cancel at the last minute, room assignments have to be remade at the last minute. The print version is out-of-date the moment it was printed. So I think a lot of behind-the-scenes effort has gone into improving the technology under the hood for the online program, especially since when we first built that online program, nobody – virtually nobody had smartphones and now everyone has smartphones.

One of the things that we've done maybe a little different, is at our biggest plenary session, we can have upwards of 1,500 or more people in the audience, and it becomes very difficult in those situations for people to ask questions of the speaker. Only the really aggressive people want to go up there to a microphone in the aisles and some of those people really want to talk rather than ask a question. So, what we've been doing the last couple of years is that I have served as the moderator and people have tweeted their questions to a hashtag. This keeps the question to 140 characters or less, allows me to see what sort of questions are trending, so I can make sure the speaker gets asked the questions that lots of people are asking, because everybody can look at the same hashtag as I'm looking at, people can see what kind of questions other people are asking. That has worked pretty well, actually. And what we did, first year we tried this, we did it because we had Nate Silver. We had, like, 3,500 people in the room, so there was no way that anybody was going to get to ask a question at a microphone. Last year, we did a combination of questions from the floor and tweets, and that worked out pretty well.

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