

Three Ways to Make Your Conference Less Stressful

By Elaina Zachos, Staff Writer at MaestroMeetings

In January, event coordinators were ranked as the eighth most stressful job for 2015 (<http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/5744-most-and-least-stressful-jobs-for-2014.html>).

We all know that planning conferences, conventions and other large-scale events can create a lot of pressure for nonprofit organizations. But here are some tips to make your organization's conference run smoothly, with less crying and more smiling.

1. Be proactive with contracting

Bargaining with hotels can be a pain. Abigail Campbell, the conference events manager for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs, says that whoever is contracting with the hotel has to be well-versed in legal jargon.

"Contracting with a hotel takes a lot of experience and a lot of logistic planning," Campbell said. "It's very serious. I mean, you can be fronted with a bill of hundreds of thousands of dollars if something isn't taken into account."

Campbell said that your conference's peak room night is your leveraging tool for bargaining with the hotel. She also recommends negotiating a conference rate at least 20 percent lower than your peak hotel night cost.

"That's a conservative number," she added.

2. Use volunteers to your advantage

As an event manager, you can't be everywhere at once. That's where volunteers come in. Melinda Colón, the associate director of governance programs and meetings for the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy said that 30 to 35 people volunteer for her organization's conference every year. The organization gives volunteers recognition in their program and on their website, an invitation to the President's Reception and an embroidered AACP polo shirt.

Colón said that volunteers get excited about these perks, especially about the AACP shirt. "It makes them feel official," she added. "It also distinguishes them [as a volunteer]."

Campbell said that "we love our volunteers," too. She is currently trying to initiate a new volunteer recognition program for AWP's conference.

3. Make sure everyone gets some R&R

With a different city every year and hundreds of academics bustling around the convention center, conferences can be hectic for everyone. AACP found a simple way to reduce stress at their annual event, and they've had great results.

AACP revamped their unpopular Learning Lounge with couches, masseurs, fruit-infused water and charging stations. They renamed the space "Recharge & Reconnect," and "everybody loved it," Colón said.

AACP got the idea for R&R after an attendee suggested that the conference provide a place for people to rest without having to go back to their hotel rooms.

R&R quickly became a hot spot at the conference venue. "It was through the roof," Colón said. "It works, so we'll use it again."