

## 5 Easy Ways to Boost Your Professional Association Conference Return on Event (ROE)

Donn LeVie Jr. / **DONN LeVIE JR.** STRATEGIES

### The Secret Lies with Professional Development Offerings

The world of conferences and conventions is a magnet for gathering people of like minds, professions, and interests. Like moths to a flame, conference attendees congregate to learn the latest tools and techniques in a variety of breakout sessions, to check out new products in exhibit halls, and to network with other professionals in the hallways and corridors.

Such events typically are viewed as investments for a specific purpose. As an investment, event planners should be aware of the different measures available to assess the financial value of such programs. They should also be responsive to those methods for evaluating the intrinsic (psychological, attitudinal, behavioral) value, often referred to as “return on event” or ROE) for attendees, which often can influence projected financial expectations for future events.

### Return on Event (ROE)

Ira Kerns, Managing Director of GuideStar Research and Meeting Metrics, described the term “return on event” (ROE) in 1991 to account for the perceived benefits expected before an event (the baseline) with post-event benchmark results from various measurements and attendee feedback. The greater the positive difference between the anticipated results and measured results, the more successful the event, yielding a high return on event. While many pre- and post-event variables must be measurable and *quantifiable*, some variables (such as written and verbal attendee feedback) provide a different dimension regarding the success of a conference.

Kerns also developed the **Core-7 Meeting Dimensions** that identify psychological and behavioral perceptions that have become useful pre-event baseline and post-event assessment measures as they pertain to a large degree to ROE:

1. Knowledge/understanding (“I know”)

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2. Opinions/perceptions/beliefs (“I agree”)
3. Feelings/attitudes (“I want to”)
4. Abilities/skills (“I can”)
5. Intentions/commitment (“I will”)
6. Behaviors (“I am doing”)
7. Business results/impacts – ROI (“I am delivering value”)

A *pre-event baseline* consists of identifying the needs, interests, and priorities of the targeted event audience, and then developing marketing/communication collateral for the appropriate channels to create interest and registrations from that audience. This phase must involve potential attendees in a focus/planning group who can provide that necessary perspective.

A *post-event measurement* or evaluation assesses attendee satisfaction or value received (for example, did not meet/met/exceed expectations) regarding the acquisition of new knowledge or skills offered through different conference tracks; change in behaviors, perceptions, or attitudes as a result of information presented; the value of pre- and post-conference workshop content; effectiveness of speakers, trainers, etc.

The following questions help assess that ROE:

- Did the programming of topic tracks, presentations, and speakers result in changes in attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors?
- Are there processes in place to ensure attendees will both act on or retain those changes post conference?
- How will attendee evaluations and feedback shape subsequent conference/event planning to provide even more value for members and attendees?
- What are the long-term implications of high ROE on the association/organization?
- Can lessons from a post-conference ROE evaluation lead to changes in association/organization member benefits?

Professional associations exist to serve the needs of the membership primarily, which suggests placing an equal if not slightly heavier emphasis on the “grass roots” ROI than the financial ROI in most cases. Professional associations exist so long as the membership is being served by highly valuable conferences, networking opportunities, valued certifications in the profession, and other member benefits. Member retention rates are critical to the organization’s financial longevity and health.

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Professional associations can extract strategic value from ROI and ROE in many ways (use of mobile conference apps can engage more attendees to provide real-time feedback and may allow for on-the-fly event changes):

- More focus on conference breakout session categories that attendees find higher value with
- Eliminate those conference amenities that attendees don't feel add significant value
- Increase conference registration and attendance for subsequent recurring events
- Invite speakers that attendees rate high to submit proposals for future events
- Delivering high content value for attendees can lead to increases in association membership
- High ROE adds to the overall value of other member benefits provided by the association or organization

### **How a Focused Professional Development Can Boost Your ROE Value**

A *focused* Professional Development track (or stem) can enhance all of the 7 Meeting Dimensions that contribute to a highly successful conference. In every professional association there are members who are looking for a job or better internal opportunities, seeking a new career, or trying to add customers or clients. Members and attendees want those psychological and behavioral perceptions affirmed and fulfilled at conference events that take them to the next level in their jobs or careers. Yet, in many professional associations, the extent of “professional development” is limited to an online job bank or “post your résumé here” option.

As a speaker, seminar leader, career strategist, I have also served on the board of several national and international associations. I have also participated in helping other associations shape successful Professional Development member benefits as well as Professional Development tracks for conference attendees that have directly contributed to higher ROE, increased membership, and enhanced membership value.

Here are a few suggestions for creating a focused Professional Development track that goes beyond inclusion of breakout sessions:

- 1. Focus on Quality Breakout Sessions with Experts Inside and Outside the Organization.** Focus on providing breakout sessions geared toward individual aspects of finding a job or changing careers (cover letters, résumés, LinkedIn profile reviews, etc), or strategies for adding clients to an existing business;

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- invite career experts\* to lead breakout sessions or pre-conference half-day seminars
- 2. Add Sessions that Focus on Effective Social Media Strategies for Getting Noticed.** Include session tracks that teach attendees the latest social media strategies for gaining access to decision makers and hiring managers
  - 3. Bring in Career Experts for Personal Career Consultations with Attendees.** Hire career strategists to conduct personal career evaluations with conference attendees. One successful approach is to have attendees pay a discounted fee (\$30 to \$50 per person) for a 30-minute session with a career strategist. The discounted attendee fee helps offset the career strategist fee charged to the conference sponsor.
  - 4. Include brief presentations by speakers during conference breaks.** During morning and afternoon conference breaks in the exhibit hall, have speakers present short mini-sessions on a stage or platform in the exhibit hall. Such topics might include: “20-minute Cover Letter Makeover”; “7 Cover Letter Clichés You Must Avoid”; or “An 8-Step Social Media Plan to Gain Access to Decision Makers.”
  - 5. Hire a Professional Photographer who Specializes in Headshots.** Hire a portrait photographer to take free headshots of attendees. At a recent conference at which I was hired for conducting personal career consultations and several breakout sessions, for two days the line for the free headshots was easily 30 to 50 people long most of each day. Attendees thought that along with the discounted individual career strategy consultations, the free headshots was one of the best Professional Development activities of the conference.

*\* I use the term “career experts” to include seasoned hiring managers, expert career strategists, and those who have personally screened, hired, and managed many people. Be cautious when hiring “certified” career professionals as many of those certifications can be earned by watching web-based videos and taking an online exam - all without the experience of hiring anyone.*

When such a Professional Development package is so positively received by conference attendees, the next step to consider is whether some of these activities and services can be incorporated into the association member benefit package. Such services could include cover letter evaluations, résumé evaluations, LinkedIn Profile evaluations, and Job Interview Coaching strategies. Be sure to hire the best available career strategist(s) to take on these responsibilities - preferably professionals that members have interacted with at a recent conferences.

## **How to Look Like a Superstar to the Sponsoring Organization, Members, and Attendees**

When conference coordinators and event planners can provide value-driven Professional Development options (and the right people to deliver them) that exceed conference attendee expectations, their strategic contribution to the event success makes them look like superstars. That momentum can carry over into growth for the association or organization as word spreads throughout the professional community about the value-rich events associated with that organization.

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Keynote speaker, seminar leader, career strategist, and award-winning author Donn LeVie Jr. helps event planners and conference coordinators become superstars.

Donn has nearly 30 years experience in hiring manager positions for such Fortune 500 companies as Phillips Petroleum, Motorola, Intel Corporation, and many others. In that career Donn has reviewed over one thousand cover letters and résumés, conducted hundreds of job interviews, and hired *and* managed countless technical, marketing, and communications professionals. In addition, Donn has taught at the University of Houston Downtown College in the Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, where he developed courses for petroleum exploration and production. Donn also worked for the federal government with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Donn is the author of *Confessions of a Hiring Manager Rev. 2.0 (Second Edition)*, WINNER of the 2012 International Book Award and the GOLD MEDAL WINNER of the 2012 Global eBook Award for Business:Careers. He is also the author of *Strategic Career Engagement: The Definitive Guide for Getting Hired and Promoted*, RUNNER-UP of the 2016 International Book Award and SILVER MEDAL WINNER of the 2016 Global eBook Award for Business:Careers.

### **Bring the No. 1 Career Strategist, Award Winning Author, and The ONE Hire Authority to Your Event**

Donn LeVie Jr. is THE keynote speaker who can push your meeting's Return on Event (ROE) through the roof. He brings a fresh perspective to propel audiences to the next step in their careers. Contact him now to talk about how his practical, insightful - and humorous - lessons learned over a 30-year career in hiring manager positions for Fortune 500 companies will inform, motivate, and entertain conference attendees.

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