



MEETINGS

Searching for next year's attendees

By Richard C. O'Sullivan

In *Waiting for Godot*, the two protagonists spend the entire play waiting for a mutual acquaintance, Godot, to arrive. Neither is sure who Godot is or what to expect when he appears, but they are both confident that when he does, their problems will be solved. Godot, of course, never shows up and the play ends as it began.

Are you waiting for an attendee who may never register? Consider several ongoing trends to avoid spending your scarce dollars waiting for Godot.

New attendees. American businesses have dramatically downsized in the past decade, outsourcing even core functions to small businesses. In the 1960s, one in every four Americans worked for a Fortune 500 firm. Today that number is one in 15. By 2001, businesses with fewer than 100 employees accounted for the majority of American jobs. Small businesses now account for more than 50 percent of the gross domestic product, provide 60 percent of new jobs, and hold 75 percent of all patents issued since 1980, according to the Small Business Administration.

Are you still positioning your conferences primarily to large businesses? The middle manager, the mainstay of many industry conferences, is gone. A senior executive or the owner of a much smaller firm will take that middle manager's place at your conference. To get that senior execu-

utive to show up, you have to emphasize contacts over content, value over price, and big-picture issues over practical how-tos.

New competitors. So where did your middle managers go? They most likely work for the firms to which their old employers outsourced their jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, business services will account for one in every four new jobs created between 2004 and 2014.

These workers will identify with their professions rather than a specific industry. They are looking for portable skills to take to their next assignment. With this shift in emphasis, community colleges and other training organizations are now competing with associations for education dollars.

What these attendees and the senior executives mentioned above have in common is that both are paying for the conference themselves and not dipping into training budgets. For them your meeting is

an investment, not a perk.

Appealing to the older worker. The United States faces a rising shortage of skilled workers. In response, many organizations are encouraging potential retirees to stay on the job. While the total workforce will grow by only 1.2 percent over the next decade, the number of workers over 55 will surge four times as fast. How do you appeal to potential attendees who are measuring their professional futures in years, not decades?

Globalization. Associations increasingly need to manage global conversations, but international travel dramatically increases the cost of attending your meeting. To reduce costs, organizations are using teleconferencing, onsite blogs, and other electronic communications—and capturing, packaging, and reselling conversations and information once lost at the hotel bar at conventional meetings.

These are just a few of the most dynamic trends changing who will attend your conferences and how you will attract them. Like Godot, the traditional attendee is not likely to show up. You may want to look for a replacement instead.

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Negotiate big (even when you're small)

When your annual meeting is only 250 people, you don't have the pull that the big dogs do. But savvy negotiators have an edge even when their attendance isn't likely to rise dramatically.

Don't present your meeting in isolation. You'll have more leverage if a hotel realizes you offer an opportunity for future business. Also, talk not just about the value of your room block but also what your attendees will spend at the spa and gift shops, on room service, and so on.

Don't make your situation harder by trying to book in the most competitive markets at the most difficult times of year—New York in October, for example.

Do be a good piece of small business. Try to book recurring meetings at the same property, or at least the same chain, to establish relationships and a history of reliability. Don't say you're going to have 500 people if you know you'll only have 250. And don't cancel for anything less than force majeure.