

Meeting Planning for the Emerging Generations

By Robert W. Wendover



15200 E. Girard Avenue
Suite 3000
Aurora, CO 80014
800-227-5510
www.gentrends.com

As the number of young professionals increases within the meetings you plan, it will be imperative to take their needs and desires into consideration. You might even begin by asking if a live gathering is necessary. Many young professionals prefer to meet and learn electronically. While this may appear threatening at first, planners who stay ahead of the curve in understanding the true role of meetings in today's organizations are the ones who will continue to thrive. Review the questions below to see if you are adequately responding to the expectations of these emerging groups.

Planning Team – Most of association and corporate leadership is still dominated by Baby Boomers (those born approximately 1946-64). Those in the emerging generations deserve a seat at the planning table during the development of meetings. What can you do to recruit and involve young people in the design, implementation and evaluation of the meetings you plan? They'll share a wealth of information and suggestions if asked.

Dates – With the new diversity of ages attending meetings, the conflicting needs are multiplying. Have you/can you take young parents' scheduling concerns into consideration, for example? (school starts, popular school holidays, spring breaks, etc?) If you schedule meetings during shoulder season to save money, will you be precluding younger workers who are balancing work responsibilities and child care?

If you schedule meetings on a Saturday, will young professionals refuse to attend because they don't work on weekends due to personal commitments? How can you determine the best time for different meetings? A series of poorly timed events can significantly impact association revenue or corporate productivity.

Location – Attracting young professionals to out-of-town meetings can be difficult due to the commitments they may have at home. Will the destination city be available at a reasonable airfare if young attendees are traveling with families? Will the location offer opportunities for entertainment? Many of those in

younger generations may wish to combine a business meeting with a long weekend of rest and relaxation.

Amenities – Do the locations you choose have amenities that might appeal to younger members or employees? Are there local attractions they might find entertaining? Are there child care and kids' activities available for those who want to bring their children? While the emerging generations understand that travel for meetings is sometimes necessary, they still look for ways to make it balanced and enjoyable.

If the meeting is being held in town, will it be timed for those who may have child-care responsibilities? Will the location force a percentage to spend too much time commuting to and from the gathering? The cost savings of choosing an out-of-the-way location may be defeated if young people find the time and distance too onerous. How can you balance the two?

Program – How will the purpose of this meeting be perceived by those in different generations? As an opportunity for networking? For socialization? For fun? For learning? For building one's influence? As a mandatory, but questionable use of time? What can you do to engage every age group, from young workers to veteran contributors?

Schedule/agenda – What's the balance of content, socialization and fun? Most young professionals would prefer more "meat" in a shorter period of time. How can you accommodate this given that many in older generations are used to the opposite?

Speakers and content – Those in younger generations have come of age on a diet of interactive media. The "talking head" is dead, yet many are still conducting breakout sessions. If the session is not engaging, they may remain in the program if necessary, but surf the web, respond to e-mail or text-message their friends in the room about how boring the meeting is. Given the opportunity, they will bolt and make a note not to attend meetings organized by _____.

Entertainment – The music acts of the 60s, 70s have been doing big business in the corporate

and association meetings market – much to the chagrin of the young people considering meeting attendance. Imagine a 28-year-old corporate manager discovering that the Beach Boys will headline the closing banquet. His first thought might be, “who wants to hear some washed-up sixties freaks? His second thought might be, “So that’s how they’re spending my \$595 registration fee.” His alternatives? A contemporary comedy act. A fun run. An organizational olympics. Maybe a Texas Hold’em contest with the winner getting lunch with the CEO. Better still, how about the night off so he can fly home a day early. Remember, this is work, even if it is held in Rancho Mirage.

Post-program follow-up – Younger generations are always looking for extra value. What can you provide to reinforce learning? Many speakers offer follow-up articles and other resources that can be used to augment sessions they presented. Can you offer downloadable documents, checklists, directories, bibliographies and such? Can you offer a teleseminar or webcast? Can you offer a forum for connecting those who have a need for more specific information than was presented during the meeting?

Evaluations – “Smile sheets” lost their effectiveness long ago as a means for evaluating learning. Can you put the evaluation on-line with an incentive to complete it? Can you organize a focus group of young attendees? Can you set up a chat room where they can go to record their true feelings about the meeting and its value?

Sponsorships – Sponsorships play an increasingly critical role in the delivery of meetings for both associations and corporations. How can potential sponsors be most effectively approached to convince them to participate? Remember that the “good ole boy” who has said “yes” for the past 15 years may be replaced by a young “upstart” who doesn’t see the value.

Once those sponsors are on board, consider how they can best engage those in all generations of

attendees. Specialized websites? Useful giveaways like CDs? Memory sticks? Interactive media? How can these organizations best connect with those attending your meeting? It’s your job to help them engage.

Promotion – What is the best way to reach your young members or workers? Most likely over the web. How well does your meeting’s web-site perform when contacted by a member? Has it been intuitively designed so it is easily navigable? Do the images reflect those of different ages and cultures? Is the copy written in such a way that younger generations will find attractive? Are there links provided to associated activities such as hotel registration, local attractions, auto rentals and airlines? Is there an electronic matching service for those who want to share a room? Can visitors click on the photos or descriptions of those speaking to hear a 30-second preview of what will be covered? You get the picture.

Registration – As a society, we are fast evolving into a “one-click” marketplace. Young people expect to register for meetings in the same way they purchase a book from Amazon.com. While emerging professionals may still read material sent through the mail, they are less likely to act on it because it requires extra steps like filling out paper forms and looking for postage. In a perfect world, they would like to click on a link that takes them to the registration page, auto-fills the information the organization has collected about them before and then sends them a confirming e-mail, all within a minute or two. If the confirming e-mail includes an incentive for booking hotel rooms early, they’ll like it even better. Does your organization do all this?

As the emerging generations continue to increase in their influence, the meetings they attend will transition with their needs and expectations. How well equipped are you to remain on the cutting edge of this transition?

Robert W. Wendover is Director of the Center for Generational Studies. His most recent book, *On Cloud Nine: Weathering the Challenges of Many Generations in the Workplace* was released by AMACOM last fall.