

Tips for Conference Planners

Speakers are often placed in situations that make it very difficult for them to feel good about their presentations. Since they are professionals, their evaluations may still be excellent, but they wish they could have done better. Sometimes a conference director's choices are limited; however, here are some tips for those who are planning conferences.

Tip #1: Have a good sound system.

Every conference speaker has a horror story about trying to speak to a large audience with an inadequate sound system. Make sure your speakers can grab an audience's attention with sheer volume when needed. Most of the time speakers can hold interest with their delivery, but sometimes a good loud system is a tool that is very helpful. Many workshop sessions are better if a microphone is available, especially when the speaker is moving back and forth between large and small group activities. Test the system for volume, feedback, and buzzing caused by electrical interference. Make sure you install fresh batteries in wireless microphones.

Tip #2: Pick rooms to fit the audience and the situation.

Energy is lost when a session for five hundred is held in an auditorium for two thousand. By the same token, packed rooms can be hot and claustrophobic. It is best to have a room that closely accommodates the size of the group. The atmosphere is electric.

Make sure the audience shape is appropriate. One speaker told of presenting to a group of two hundred students arranged in five rows forty chairs wide. The seating decision was based on convenience, but those at the ends were essentially left out.

If the general session is in a gym, use one side of bleachers with chairs set up in front instead of using both sets of bleachers, forcing a speaker to speak to two audiences at the same time.

Stand in the front of the room and imagine what it would be like to hold an audience's attention.

Tip #3: Set up a realistic schedule and stick to it.

When inadequate time is permitted for bus arrivals and registration, the keynote speaker doesn't have time for a first rate performance and is interrupted by late arrivals. If the opening session goes overtime, the workshop presentations that follow will suffer. Going ten minutes overtime in the opening session may not seem like much, but the workshop

speakers who follow must scurry to cover their material.

Between workshop sessions, allow plenty of time for passing. It's almost impossible for attendees to go from one workshop to the next in five minutes. Too short a passing time means shorter workshops no matter what the printed schedule says. Usually ten minutes between sessions is good. In some facilities even fifteen minutes are needed, but a tighter schedule gives the conference a better feeling.

Allow enough time for workshop speakers to do their job. Although some middle school conferences like short sessions, thirty minutes usually isn't enough. Most conferences allow forty to fifty minutes for each workshop session.

Tip #4: Plan the opening session.

The whole conference is affected by the opening session. Some conferences just hire a keynote speaker with no other thought about who will do introductions and formalities. To bring about group unity, some conferences have a D.J. playing music as the audience arrives. This gives students something to do. Some talk, some dance, but they are drawn in with a sense of purpose. Some conferences have a good "chants and cheers" leader unifying the group before the actual program begins. Pick a strong speaker to welcome the audience, introduce the keynote speaker, take the microphone back after the keynote, explain the schedule, and direct students to their workshops. Some conferences have eliminated the opening general session, but don't. It is a unifying force that brings order to the rest of the day.

Tip #5: Provide thorough directions.

Many facilities are difficult to understand. Attendees arrive at sessions late, making it difficult to start on time. Have good maps and excellent signs. Arrows and student guides are also helpful.

Tip #6: In conferences that mix middle school and high school leaders, meet the needs of both whenever possible.

Middle school students are intimidated by older ones, and high school students would rather not be mixed in with middle schoolers. Indicate in your printed program which workshops are appropriate for middle and high school and which are good for both. If your conference is large enough, hire two keynote speakers. Have one open the high school session and the other open the middle school session. Then switch them for the closing sessions. Some

conferences even stagger lunches, having an all high school workshop while the middle school students eat and middle school workshops while the high school students eat. By staggering lunches and crisscrossing keynoters, you meet the needs of your students.

Tip #7: End early.

The majority of high school students have athletic and cheer practice after school. If your conference is within easy driving distance, groups of students will stand up and leave during the closing session so that they can get back to practice. Take this into account and end early. At the very least, ask those who must leave early to sit in back of the room during the closing session and to leave quietly.

Tip #8: Keep your speakers informed.

Just a form letter confirming the dates and times is all a speaker needs, but some conferences just rely on a casual verbal contact. As the date approaches, the speakers aren't sure if they are performing or not. They would be happier with written confirmation. Even better would be an early letter asking for audio-visual needs and room set-up requirements.

Tip #9: Have checks ready promptly.

Often a speaker has purchased airfare months in advance to provide the best rates possible. This is money they have been unable to use for a considerable period of time. It isn't fair to delay repayment. Many speakers rely on their fees for a living. If you are slow to pay, the speakers begin to wonder if they'll ever receive compensation. If your bookkeeping system is the problem, figure out how to have paperwork done in advance.

Both keynote speakers and workshop presenters want to do their very best. All would like a good evaluation, and for many, it's their living. They would like to be invited back again. The decisions conference planners make affect their performance greatly. The really good speakers will succeed anyway, but give them all the breaks you can. The speakers will benefit, and your conference will shine!