Use Your Event Web Site to Promote Strong, Healthy Growth

RCM Staff Report

Y Your event Web site should serve two purposes: Attract new attendees and retain existing ones. If you can answer everyone's questions, you have gained friends. You've given them a good experience. Here are tips on how to make it happen.

A well-tended Web site can be the difference between dormant and vibrant meeting attendance

Budgeting

Make it easy for attendees to compute the cost of coming to the meeting. Provide comprehensive information regarding costs.

• Tell attendees when the meeting begins—not just the date but the time of day. This helps in making travel arrangements and deciding how many nights to stay in a hotel.

• Give hotel price information up front; people want to know that before they decide how many nights to book.

• Let people know what meals, if any, are included in the conference price.

• Provide transportation information. How close is the hotel to the airport? Will shuttles be provided? Is the shuttle included in the conference price? If shuttle service isn't available, then what is recommended, and how much will it cost?

Visual Best Practices

People will make a decision on the quality of your Web site in less than one second. It's hard to believe, but it's true.

• Use graphics and photos. Use photos of people attending past conferences. Potential attendees want to be able to see themselves attending your conference. Photos of people do this. Photos of buildings do not.

• In your marketing materials, send people directly to the conference information on the Web. Don't send them to a home page and force them to navigate the site to find the conference pages.

• Use a professional. Everybody has tight budgets, but if you have to cut back on something, do not cut back on design. People will use the quality of your Web site to make decisions about the quality of your conference. Ask yourself: Does my Web site reflect my organization's level of professionalism? Or am I hoping that attendees will assume that the level of professionalism is better than my Web site? Not many people will make that assumption. A professional look is critical.

• Splash pages. These are the mini-movies that you are sometimes forced to watch before entering a Web site. These were fine when the Web was a novelty, but today they annoy people. Don't use splash pages. And remember that conference attendees will visit your site an average of 20 times. They don't want to see the splash page 20 times!

Using Web Sites for Growth

Navigation

Web site navigation has to be simple, but making it simple can be a challenge. Reduce the number of navigation buttons to a manageable number: Five is ideal.

• Use the upper-right corner of the conference main page for a reminder of important deadlines. Design the page so that these reminders can be updated as the meeting approaches.

• Make sure the header of your pages is the same on all pages, because only 20 percent to 30 percent of your Web traffic arrives first at your home page. Search engines often will send people to internal pages.

• Use type or affinity navigation. Three types of people are visiting your site: Those who are seeking information regarding your conference; those who are ready to register for your conference; and those who have registered already and are coming back to the site for updates, to book hotels, etc.

• Quick links. Typically this is a drop-down menu of the most frequently visited pages of a Web site. Quick links make it easy for people to find the information they need. Quick links are particularly useful for sites that contain a lot of information.

• Include a "register now" button that links to the registration page.

Content

Use testimonials. Testimonials are very important. Just as potential attendees want to see photos of past meetings, they also want to hear the voices of people who have attended. Consider having the testimonials randomly load as visitors are going through the Web site. And underneath each of these testimonials, have a link that says "more testimonials." This link should take attendees to a page filled with testimonials. The testimonial page can be useful for attendees, who will print the page and show it to decision-makers within their organizations.

• Answer important questions. This will help people decide whether to attend. Questions could include: how to register online, how to register offline, pricing, group rates, important dates, deadlines, international registration, general policies, registration confirmation, making changes to an existing registration, and the cancellation and refund policy. Doing a good job with these questions will decrease the number of phone calls and e-mails you receive, leaving the calls and e-mails for specific, unusual situations.

A hotel and transportation page might answer questions regarding reserving a room, hotel prices and amenities, the hotel cancellation policy, shuttles, rental cars, taxis. For example, people really want to know if the hotel rooms have blow dryers or coffeepots. They will love you for including this information.

• Include a map. People always are wondering about the proximity of accommodations to meeting locations.

• Have a button for first-timers. People attending for the first time need a lot of reassurance. Show them that you're there to help and make their experience a great one by giving them the information that they need.

• With speakers' pages, include photographs and bios, plus all of the times and locations where the specific speakers will be appearing; don't make attendees go to two different places for that information. Think about different ways to present the same information. Offer choices. For example, let people go to a list of speakers or a list of speakers by topic.

• Keep your site current. Event Web sites are the worst for this. The sites need to be active and useful 12 months of the year. Don't let last year's event Web site stay up for months after the event is over. People are going to come to your Web site the day after the event, to decide if they want to attend next year. These could be people who

just come across your event Web site, people who had a great experience and want to attend next year, or people who weren't able to attend this year. Make it standard practice to build a page or pages that can be loaded onto your site on the last day of your conference. This page should include info from the just-completed event, plus details of the next one. The page also should include a link to the pages from the event that just ended. Place a bright yellow text strip on all of the old pages, saying "This is last year's conference program."

• Promote specific benefits. If your meeting is being held in San Diego in February, for example, give information regarding San Diego's weather.

• Help your customers do your marketing for you. If you are planning a youth gathering, create a two-minute video and mount it on your site; youth workers will show the video to their staff, board, and perhaps other youth workers to get them excited. Offer to send brochures to attendees so they can pass them along to potential attendees. Include on your Web site PDFs of your conference brochures and posters, so the pieces can be downloaded and printed. ■

This article is based on a tutorial given by Mike Atkinson, president of uneekNet, at a past RCMA.

Two Principles

Redundancy is not a bad thing with user Web sites. Redundancy makes navigation easier. For example, if you asked a roomful of people to find the group rates on your site, you'd be amazed at the number of ways people will take to find the group rates.

Work hard to **simplify**. No matter how well a site is designed, there's always a ramp-up time for new users of the site, in both how to use it and learning what is available on the site. The simpler the site, the easier it is for users to be confident using the site. Remember, the more information and graphics that you throw on the home page, the greater the chance that users will flee as soon as they see it. So always be asking: Am I giving attendees the important information easily?