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Taming the *Convention Jungle* With Good On-Site Communication

By Meryl Runion

Convention centers overwhelm me. I think it would be easier to find my way around the Amazon jungle. I am convinced there are people in convention centers still trying to find their way out of conferences they attended years ago. I believe there are people who attended the wrong conference simply because they could find the right one.

I've never been to the Amazon, but if I were to go, I certainly would want someone to guide me. And while, as a meeting planner, you have too much to do to act as a personal guide to every conference attendee, there is much you can do to reassure and redirect the wary traveler who is daunted by the abyss of a convention center.

Start by discovering and marking with an arrow every possible trailhead with your company or association logo. No one would dream of approaching a conference through the service entry...or would they? Just because there is a dumpster by the door, never assume one of your attendees wouldn't see it as their perfect point of entry. Have directions there as well.

There is also much comfort in having "people movers" who wear sashes or signs that let people know they are a member of their tribe and can be trusted to direct attendees where they want to go.

There is also much comfort and efficiency in having a room or location for administrators who know where everyone is and know how to contact everyone involved in planning the event.

To accomplish this, it is essential that

each administrator has agreed upon rules of communication. It is very disconcerting when the one person with the knowledge is incommunicado even for a few minutes. Of course, cell phones are the obvious solution, but don't trust your cell phones unless you have tested them in every likely and unlikely convention center location. Sure, you may have a signal when you journey to the shipping cage, but does your assistant? If not, you need to consider alternative communication such as radios or check-in intervals through a house phone.

It also can be a source of frustration when the convention center staff disappear. I remember a convention when I spent about 45 minutes waiting around for a head table. A staff member said he would get me one and disappeared. Since I needed to set the table up, I waited. Fifteen minutes later, another staffer came by. I told him about my need, and he disappeared. When another staffer came by 15 minutes after that and asked if I needed anything, I didn't know if I had two people on my task or no one. Throwing caution to the wind, I explained what I needed, and it was another 15 minutes before one of the staffers showed up with a table. With the conference about to start, I had many better uses for my time than to wait for a table. Had the staffers updated me on their progress in getting the table, I would have been able to use that time more efficiently.

Now, here is what I say when I think there is any chance of a staff member disappearing:

- When can I expect that to arrive?
- If something else comes up and you are gone longer than 10 minutes, please update me at this number.
- I have everything I need right now, but if I think of something, how can I reach you?
- I have everything I need right now, but please check back with me in X minutes.

A smooth-running event at a convention center—or any site, for that matter—requires anticipating every possible communication glitch and having a back-up plan. Sure, it's not your fault if an attendee enters through the shipping bay and never returns, but if you can anticipate the danger and ward it off, you will be a meeting planner extraordinaire. Imagine the satisfaction of hearing an attendee say, "I was completely lost, rationing my M&Ms and water and starting to lose hope, and there it was, the association logo with an arrow. I followed it and it led me to a person wearing a sign who directed me to the welcome station. With their help I found every session I signed up for, and I had a great convention." §



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