

## How To Create A Welcoming Environment At Association Gatherings

### By Meryl Runion

Planning an association meeting or convention has much in common with planning a party. You want people to accept your invitation, you want them to get what they came for, and you want them to look forward to coming back. A good hostess takes responsibility for her guests' experience and makes efforts to introduce them to other attendees to ensure their good time. However, at an association meeting or convention, you are likely to have far too many "guests" to give them the individual attention you could at a party. That's why PowerPhrases® are important to facilitate connections so people leave feeling satisfied.

### When An Event Feels Like High School

Have you ever attended an association meeting and felt like the odd one out? Have you ever gone to a convention and decided you were the only one who didn't know everyone? Association conventions can be like high school, with impenetrable inner circles. If participants and newcomers don't feel valued, they are unlikely to return. If people don't return, your association weakens, and it is a reflection on you. How can you, as the meeting planner, encourage members to embrace each other and the visitors to your association?

### Pick Some Partners And Inspire Them With Titles

First, know that you can't do it alone. Enroll a team of association ambassadors to be your co-hosts. Then, transform your new team by giving them titles that

match their personalities. My son had a little league coach who gave each player a nickname based on their strengths. The cleanup batter was called "Mr. Clean" because he cleared the bases with his hits. The catcher was called "Captain Crunch" because he did well in a crunch. The kids were motivated by their titles, and your ambassadors can be as well. Don't limit yourself to titles like "Ambassador" and "Co-host." Get creative with names like "Participant Partner," "Secret Agent," "Connection Catalyst," "The Networker," "The Barrier Breaker," "The Distance Dissolver," "The Minister of Melding," "The Mingler," and "The Merry Merger." Better yet, let them pick their own titles. You will be amazed at how seriously they will take the responsibility if they have a title that means something to them.

### Provide Your Partners PowerPhrases To Break the Ice

Second, arm your team with PowerPhrases to open conversations, such as "We're glad you're here," "It's newcomers like you who make this group strong," and "Thanks so much for coming."

These phrases are very simple, yet they are often not heard or even implied at events.

To build rapport, some excellent networking questions are "What made you decide to come to the convention?" "What do you want to get out of this meeting?" "What do you like about what you do?" "How did you learn about this association?" "What other associations do you

belong to?" "What do you like about them?"

Self-disclosure is an effective way to open a conversation if your comments are brief and brought back to the other person. Help your team create comments like "When I first started coming, I wasn't sure I wanted to join. I'm glad I did because this association has become another family for me. Are you thinking about joining?" "My first meeting, I felt shy until I found out there were plenty of people who like being in groups?" "I have gotten more business and good advice from this group than I ever imagined. What kind of contacts are you looking for?"

The best PowerPhrases for your team are the ones they create on their own. Help them do that, and they will create deeper connections with others than ever before.

### Tapping Into Hidden Treasures

Finally, let your team know that there is a hidden treasure in every person at the meeting. The tendency is to stay within our comfort zone and interact only with the people we know or to cozy up to the "elite" leaders and industry experts. I once met a woman at a conference who was going through a tough time. Her conversation focused on her powerlessness. I thought I was giving more than I would get back from our interaction, but I recently discovered that wasn't true. She went on to an influential position in a major corporation and was responsible for ordering copies of my book for each person in the massive cus-

tommer service department. She advocated for them to bring me in for speaking and training. I would not have guessed that my attention to and support of this woman would have been so well rewarded.

If you have a story like this, share it with your ambassadors and with the membership as a whole if possible. If you address the meeting, ask the group to look to the left and to the right, and to the front and to the back. Tell them that every person they just saw has some kind of treasure inside them and that discovering the treasure could be one of the most valuable things they will do at the conference. Ask them to try to discover the treasure in others in every conversation they have.

### The Host/ess With The Most/est

As the meeting planner, you are the main host or hostess. If you help participants welcome each other, they will want to come to the events you plan, they will get what they want at your events, and they will look forward to returning. Oh, yes, and your evaluations will make you shine. Let your ambassadors and PowerPhrases help you be the host/ess with the most/est. §



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