

Enable & Facilitate

Education, management and information services especially for small businesses and associations

A Unique Experience

Over the years Leipper Management Staff have attended and participated in a wide variety of national and international meetings and conferences for associations ranging from the National Education Association to the Association for Volunteer Administration International Conference; from a regional conference for the National Association of Social Workers to a conference held by Borland software company introducing their product, Paradox.

This summer we had the unique opportunity to attend the 41st International Rally of the Wally Byam Caravan Club in Boise Idaho. The WBCCI is the association of Airstream recreational vehicle owners. As the third generation member of our family to attend a WBCCI international rally, we went with a lot of enthusiasm.

We felt this would provide a great opportunity to experience an association event that not only provided attendees with workshops, special events, and evening entertainments common to most association conferences, but also created a small city where the attendees brought their own "hotel rooms" (their RV's). Almost 1900 Airstreams were parked in this temporary city bringing approximately 3800 rally attendees.

Most of the work of developing the infrastructure of the rally, creating a city in an open field, organizing and presenting workshops, and carrying out all other aspects of this rally is done by volunteers. Elected officers such as the international board of directors and the regional presidents also play a role in ensuring the success of the rally. Support is provided by paid staff at the national headquarters.

An example of this volunteer effort is the WBCCI band that plays at various events throughout the rally. People sign up to participate in the band months ahead of the rally and they arrive at the rally site a month or more before the rally to attend practice sessions. Their dedication produced very high quality enjoyable entertainment that enhanced the activities.

This type of event involves coordination and cooperation with regulatory entities, city officials, and other community resources of the host city. A tradition of the WBCCI rallies is to give something back to the host city. This year, for example, members collected canned goods to donate to local food programs, knitted hats to donate to social service programs, and collected pennies for a local child who had had a five organ transplant.

These rallies are member driven and the people involved give a lot of time and effort. This rally maintained some of the traditions of the association such as the opening flag ceremony. It added new elements to meet current needs. Most of all it provided an opportunity for Airstream owners to come together and share common experiences, to meet old friends, and to make new acquaintances. Overall, it was a great learning experience.

The rally gave us a lot of ideas about what makes such an event work and succeed. In this special issue of Enable & Facilitate we share some of our thoughts with you and hope they may be beneficial to you in planning your own association conference.

Event Planning

The Leipper Management Group can help your association plan a great meeting or conference. LMG has been involved in the planning of events ranging from local workshops to regional and national conferences. LMG has managed meetings for as few as five participants to events and conferences for as many as 1300 participants. We have experience with all phases of planning and production including developing the program, site selection and arrangements, speaker/presenter selection and support, exhibit/vendor management, budgeting, and documentation. We have developed a variety of resource materials and planning guides that will help make your event a success.

Creating A Successful Event

➔ *Attitude*

Something got me thinking about the Bill Cosby skit where he plays a coach in the locker room getting the team fired up to go out, play the game, and win. He got the team all fired up and ready to enter the field - and the door was locked. Obviously, there is more to winning than attitude! Planning and preparation are also needed but attitude, the spirit to succeed, is a vital ingredient.

Attitude can, and should, get a bad rap when it is used to condemn an individual as is sometimes the case in 'performance' evaluations. Attitude as a descriptor for an association's expectations can be a useful concept to find ideas for improvement in otherwise subtle areas.

Two such attitudes can make a significant difference at a conference or association get together. One is

that of success and the other is a marketing extroversion. When these attitudes are not properly in place, you will notice an uneasiness and behaviors and problems that detract from the quality of your convention or conference. Desired attitudes must be ingrained into the belief system of all volunteers and staff involved in the conference in order for those beliefs to spread to all attendees. Good leadership includes the practice of instilling in the followers the belief that the efforts will succeed and are worthwhile.

The success attitude is what causes people to look for solutions rather



than excuses or rationalizations.

The marketing extroversion attitude might be considered a success attitude but it is of sufficient importance that it should be considered on its own. It is the kind of attitude that causes a person to reach out to another and include the other in whatever is happening. It is expressed in an effusiveness and pride that reaches out to others and lets them know they really ought to buy in and join up.

➔ *Information*

The role of information in the success of any event or conference cannot be underestimated. Before the conference it serves as a promotional and recruitment tool. At a conference, it serves the attendees by providing comfort, reassurance, and guidance. Information needs to be provided as soon as possible and be consistent, clear, comprehensive, concise, and continuous. Information needs to be repeated often in a variety of formats and be widely available.

Never assume that everyone knows everything. This is especially true with first time attendees. They may not be familiar with the culture and traditions of the associations conferences. Provide FAQ sheets, have ambassadors whose only task is to greet each first timer at registration and spend time answering their questions, explaining

procedures, and going over the registration packet.

Use the information on the application to personalize responses and identify attendees. For instance, providing radio call signs is part of the WBCCI registration process. This information can be used by the net operators to welcome attendees to the rally radio net and answer any questions they might have.

Take advantage of current technologies such as E-mail and web sites to promote and distribute information regarding the conference. A web site can also be used by attendees at the conference to access a daily newsletter or schedule changes. Make it possible for people to register for the conference on the Web. Use a web site to include people who cannot attend in

person. The first pictures and information from the WBCCI conference appeared on an attendees Web Site, The Society of Uppity Women, www.uppitywomen.com

Pre-event Registration

Initial conference announcements are marketing tools. They announce key information regarding the event such as dates, location, main activities, special event highlights, and sign ups for any committee or volunteer participation.

The conference registration should provide all information necessary for full participation, including registration for any extra events or special lunches or dinners. If there are any limits or conditions regarding sign ups for extra events they should be noted in the registration packet. The registration

materials should also include a preliminary outline of planned presentations, workshops, and events.

Registration materials can be included in a regular association publication, but to make it most effective it should be an insert and distinct from the publication itself. All pertinent information should be included in this one document - not spread through multiple issues of the publication. It should be something the potential participant knows he should keep with him as a reference.

Registration Confirmation

Registration confirmation should be sent in a timely manner. For first time attendees, a special information sheet or FAQ should be included that provides all the information needed to arrive at the conference fully prepared.

On-Site Registration

Registration sets the tone for the entire conference. How the registration is handled, how and what is included in the registration materials

influences the attendee's attitude about the conference and about the association. When a participant arrives at the conference, the registration should be easy to locate within the facility and efficiently organized and handled. Hours of operation should take into consideration the needs of attendees.

Participant Packet

When planning a vacation, the first things you grab are the maps and brochures to find out what kind of place you want to visit, how to get there, and what activities and points of interest are available. The participant packet fills this need with conference attendees. It should include all materials and information the participant will need to take full advantage of the conference and to feel they will have an enjoyable and productive experience. This includes registration verification, conference manual, event tickets, nametag, and evaluation.

This packet should include a directory or listing of all attendees, where they are staying,

"Our perspective is special events have to be integrated into an organization. They should be part of, and complement, the organization's overall objectives," says Ted Geier, Cause Effective's founding Executive Director

what organization or company they are with, and contact information including E-mail addresses. A directory for a WBCCI rally would include attendees RV number, their Unit, and any CB or Amateur Radio Call Signs.

Information about the workshops or other educational sessions should include the time and date and a short description of the class as well as a short biography of the presenter.

On-going

There will be changes no matter how good your informational pieces are. A daily newsletter, updates on the bulletin board, announcements at meetings or over designated CB or amateur radio channels can be utilized to inform attendees. The key is to make sure the attendees know about these communication resources (mention them in registration materials for instance) and that they are easily accessible to all attendees.

➔ Customer Service

All successful politicians know the value of meeting the constituents face to face. Standard and often maligned stereotypes of politicians shaking hands, kissing babies, and asking you "how are you doing?" communicate that you are recognized as an individual. Even though you may think it is not sincere, the effort has a positive impact.

At a conference or any other association get together, a similar style adopted by board members, committee chairs and others can reap untold benefits for the association. This will be especially effective if the efforts are sincere and coupled with success and marketing extroversion attitudes.

There is always talk about how to get attendees to meet, mingle, and talk with people they didn't know before the conference. Who better to set the example for this than the elected officers of the association? These people are often seated at a special table or isolated (unintentionally or by design) from the general activities of the conference.

Among the many benefits of "management by walking around" are:

- ◆ Get to know the membership, who they are, what interests them, why they came (an effective evaluation tool not only for the conference but for the asso-

ciation as a whole).

- ◆ Body language and other subtle cues can also give you information on how the person feels about the questions you ask.
- ◆ Increase individual members sense of belonging and of being important to the association. This can enhance retention and commitment to the association.
- ◆ Minimizing the "us vs them" feeling.
- ◆ Gives members a better opportunity to know the people who have been elected to carry out the business of the association.

➔ *Workshops and Events*

Picture taken by WBCCI member Linda Spencer Herbst



To encourage participation, the workshops should be easily accessible to the hotels where people are staying. The unique element and common denominator for those attending the WBCCI rally is their RV's. The RV is not only their hotel room it is the focus of their interest in attending the conference. It would therefore be beneficial to hold workshops and events in or adjacent to the RV area.

Workshops directly focused on the care, maintenance, and use of the RV would, in particular, benefit from on-site presentations. In recent years several sites have been developed to meet the needs of conferences such as this. They include RV parking as well as all other conference amenities in one comprehensive site.

If the conference is held at a hotel, effort should be made to ensure all events are on the same level and/or in the same area of the hotel. This ensures much easier access and prevents confusion.

A session for first timers or people new to the profession or group assists

attendees to feel welcome. At the WBCCI rally they had a nice coffee and donut reception before the first timers orientation. The club Executive Director and the chairs of several key committees gave presentations.

A first timers session provides information not only on who is who, but even more important what, when, where, why, and how. A first timers meeting can also be an event evaluation tool. If there are a lot of questions, they should guide a review of the registration process or materials. If a lot of people are not aware of some element of the event or seem to not have information then maybe the marketing and information dispersal systems need to be reviewed.

As an alternative to standard conference workshops consider tracts, one series of workshops for experienced attendees or advanced knowledge and one for new attendees or those who need the basics.

Explore new ways of providing hands on or interactive experiences.

For instance, ask a group of volunteers to do a presentation on what they consider an effective volunteer orientation and training process.

What about inviting the community in to a special afternoon or evening activity? Specifically target the community elements whose interests are the same as your association. Some efforts have been made in this direction but there are a lot of creative ideas to explore.

Some events standard to most WBCCI international rallies include indoor and outdoor games, fashion shows, photo shows and contests, various dancing activities, a member choir, a flea market, unit publications and history contests, and unit display boards. Many of these ideas could be translated to other types of association conferences to provide a new and different way of getting to know fellow members and share information.

Why not have board games available in the lounge or hospitality room? There are games for non-profit and volunteer organizations on the market or invent your own just for the conference. Physical activity provides a break from sitting all day. Why not organize tournaments. A conference for a professional associations might create teams composed of people who work in various segments of the profession. For instance, school counselors and social service counselors or youth program volunteer managers and health care volunteer managers.

Each Unit (local chapter) of WBCCI brought their newsletter, membership directory, and the club history albums. These were displayed and then judged as to various publication criteria. Each unit also had a creative board display. These were located in a main hall where all attendees could see them.

Whatever format you choose, workshop and presenter descriptions are your best marketing tool. Attendees need more than a workshop name on which to make their participation decisions. Short descriptive paragraphs on the presenters

Workshop Idea

As chair of a committee charged with planning membership programs, we created a unique approach. Our theme, "Surfing on the DVS Network" was designed around television channels and programs and included:

- Channel 1 - CNN Business News (The DVS as a Corporate Player)
- Channel 2 - DVS Soap Digest (A Day in the Life of a DVS)
- Channel 3 - Discovery Channel (Self Discovery or - Get A Life)
- Channel 4 - A&E Biography (The Making of a DVS)

These programs were all interactive, distinct in their presentation, and different from anything tried in the past. All had a well defined educational element based on the needs of the membership and all were very successful. Attendees were stimulated to think of things from a different point of view and left the meetings with new information and good feelings about themselves and the job they were doing.

*DVS - Director of Volunteer Services

qualifications or experience, highlights of the workshop content and especially any information noting that a workshop is part of a series or a certi-

fication requirement is critical to the attendee's decisions of how to spend their time.

➔ *Volunteers*

The WBCCI rally wouldn't happen without volunteers. Volunteers are the "worker bees" and the front line customer service representatives. Volunteers enable an organization to contain conference costs while enhancing services to attendees.

There are numerous committees who work all year long on various aspects of the WBCCI rally. They include the Parking Committee, Information, Communications, Sanitation, and Electrical Committees. Many of these committees include members who have been involved for a number of years and they know their jobs inside and out.

Volunteers need to work in concert. Each volunteer and committee needs to be aware of the work done by the others and how each committee fits into the overall structure of the conference planning. It is up to the designated staff or coordinator to facilitate this process and make sure they have the information, training, and resources they need to carry out their responsibilities in a cheerful, efficient, and effective manner.

Standard volunteer management techniques could greatly enhance the effectiveness of these dedicated volunteers and facilitate a more coordinated effort. This structure does not have to be highly regimented but

it should include basic pieces.

- ◆ A manual or handbook that includes all volunteer responsibilities and the specific responsibilities of each committee.
- ◆ Job descriptions, ways to encourage and recognize volunteers.
- ◆ Methods of promoting, recruiting, and including new committee members.
- ◆ Methods for volunteer orientation or training, in particular at the conference/rally.

Holding an on-site orientation for all volunteers on all committees helps build team spirit and lets everyone know who is doing what so that, if a question is asked they can either answer or direct the questioner to the proper person.

Statements such as "I don't know the answer, I'm not on that committee" or "they are just volunteers..." are indicative of the lack of overall structure, are insulting to the volunteers who freely give of their time, and are frustrating to attendees (especially first timers) who need information.

The Disney Corporation is a great example of good volunteer (and paid staff) management and training. Everyone involved knows the mission

of Disneyland and the basics of the organization. Everyone is responsible for upholding the standards of customer service that makes Disneyland the "happiest place in the world."

Enthusiasm

"Our pre-race meetings are really fun-they're the only ones where people come half-an-hour before the meeting begins-and some of them actually come in costume! Its the time where a lot of people will be coming up with ideas-some of them pretty zany - and I've learned to write them all down because you never know - what may sound crazy at first may become a winner in some other concept or aspect."

"You will be using lots of volunteer workers during the race and in the weeks leading up to it, and we've found that it's important before each race that these volunteers be told that they are doing what they're doing because they want to. We have a procedure where the board members have to stand up and say, "We're doing this because we want to, we expect no pay, no compliments, no nothing." We want to have fun and if we feel we want to be thanked, then we ask the crowd to thank us, and they do, and it's fun."
Hobart Brown, Founder, Kinetic Sculpture Race

Recognition of volunteer effort promotes a positive attitude and enthusiasm for all involved and goes a long way towards ensuring the success of the event. Listing of all committees and their members; public acknowledgement; and distinctive nametags. Don't forget the simple but very important, thank you we appreciate your time and contributions.

Surveys

In planning a symposium for association leadership, LMG sent out a survey to over 500 potential attendees as part of the initial announcement package. This survey gave us valuable information as to the needs and interests of potential attendees. It provided leads for potential presenters and sponsors, and it encouraged participation and support from those that were interested in attending.

➔ *Evaluations*

A letter from a 'first timer' in the WBCCI publication, *Blue Beret* illustrates what an association has going for it in that its members will have a disposition towards finding the positive. Once people have made a purchase commitment, they will tend to want to feel that it was a good purchase. This can make it difficult to find exactly where your member's purchase did not quite come up to full expectations. If you do not find this out early, you will find it out late as participation and membership declines.

The question is how to find out early! This requires making evaluation an integral and ongoing part of the activity planning and not just an afterthought, a piece of paper exit survey. Effective evaluation takes many forms, involves all conference planners, workers, and attendees, and includes all aspects of the conference.

Evaluation should begin the moment the conference is announced and should continue to include post conference debriefings by the planning committee.

An overall conference evaluation should address all key elements of the

event. Each workshop should have its own evaluation. One part of your evaluation strategy should be what Hewlett Packard has called "management by walking around." Are there folks near registration desks and other high traffic or high intensity areas who are there to listen and to talk with folks and who have a mission (supported by training and experience) to detect satisfaction measures? Are the folks who are in direct customer contact sensitized to the needs to listen and observe in order to report their conclusions about customer satisfaction? Is there a system in place for these people to document these informal evaluations and to pass them along to a centralized point for inclusion in the overall evaluation process?

Surveying or sending an evaluation to association members who did not attend the conference can provide valuable input. This group may have

insightful reasons as to why they chose not to attend. This could have multiple benefits including gathering information that could be useful in planning future conferences that would encourage these people to attend. Another would be an acknowledgment of these members, let them know that their ideas are important even if they didn't attend and that you would like to see them at future events.

To create effective evaluations that will provide valuable insight take a lot of consideration and planning but increased attendance, increased attendee satisfaction, and stronger membership support are worth the effort. Remember, any evaluation is incomplete unless it creates actions in future efforts.



➔ *Logistics*

WBCCI can claim expert status in the logistics of building a city in the middle of an empty field and of directing people to that site. The parking committee's use and deployment of signs along the freeways and roads leading to the rally site were superb. The laying out of

parking spaces for 1900 RV's was down to an art. Providing electricity and water to all those trailers was well planned and coordinated. The sanitation committee system of scheduling to empty tanks was a study in efficiency.

With any type of conference, logistics can be one of the most difficult areas to deal with but it is also one of the most important. If the logistics have been fully considered and planned they will not be readily noticeable. What you will see is that things flow

smoothly, that attendees seem happy and excited - not confused or frustrated - and that most of the unexpected glitches seem to go unnoticed.

Schedules need to be established, published, distributed and maintained. Be sure that the schedules not only take into consideration the times for events but also the convenience of the attendees. If changes must occur, use a variety of communication methods to be sure that people know as much in advance as possible.

Best Laid Plans

Over a year of planning for an outdoor event for 1100 participants, the business that we had contracted with to cater food went through three head chefs, none of which were told about our event. Constant vigilance, communication, and the fact that we had made sure to negotiate a specific written contract ensured we had food. The owners of the business ended up with the job of preparing and serving our meal.

Services

If transportation is part of the conference, be sure that the schedule is known and posted in the registration packet, on bulletin boards, and in other materials. Have designated, convenient, and easily accessible places for people to wait.

If you have support services such as a business center where attendees can use telephones, computers, and other such equipment, again set specific hours of operation. Post any instructions or other information necessary for use of the equipment. Be sure to have enough equipment to meet the needs. One way to do this is a pre-conference survey included in the registration materials which asks questions about what attendees would like to see and how they would use a service center.

A well defined schedule for a business/service center is especially critical in a situation where attendees may be staying in hotels other than the main conference facility. At the WBCCI rally for instance, the RV park-

A successful conference (rally) is everyone's responsibility as is the ongoing development of membership. Taking a positive sales and marketing approach can increase attendee satisfaction. It can provide unlimited opportunities for membership development. It can enhance opportunities for corporate sponsorship and vendor participation.

There are numerous resources available to provide ideas and support

ing was several miles from the conference and event site. Having transportation and support services such as telephone and E-mail access available from early morning until at least early evening would enable people to take advantage of these resources without having to do it between meetings, be late or miss events, and have to wait because everyone else is trying to use the resources at the same time.

Exhibit Center

Exhibit centers or vendor areas should be easily accessible, in a high traffic area, big enough to not be crowded, and possibly big enough to hold events. Hours should meet the needs of the attendees as well as the vendors.

What Next?

to the planning process. One such resource is the Energize web page, www.energizeinc.com. This web page has a monthly "Hot Topic" discussion issue. The September "Hot Topic" subject is titled Reinventing Conferences and provides some excellent ideas and suggestions.

A conference should be fun as well as productive for everyone involved. To help make sure your conference is successful and productive, review and

Exhibitor Idea

Our local Chamber of Commerce had an orientation for exhibitors a week or so prior to their Trade Show. It was well attended and beneficial, not only for experienced but also for first time exhibitors. The program included knowledgeable presenters who provided valuable information on everything from how to set up your booth to attract attention to how to follow up on contacts. It was also a great way to meet other exhibitors and share ideas.

A similar thing could be done at any conference, maybe the night or morning before the exhibit center opens for business. This meeting could address any last minute questions and give both the exhibitors and planners an opportunity to get to know each other better. It could also give the conference planners a great opportunity to personally thank the exhibitors for their participation.

The goal of any exhibit booth is to attract potential customers. When designing your booth it is important to think about the message you are sending about your business. Access to product samples and to personnel is crucial. You need to be able to talk to people and people need to be able to examine and handle product samples.

learn from past experiences, solicit and listen to ideas, suggestions, and criticisms, and explore new ideas, be creative, use available resources (of the association and in the community in which the conference is held) effectively, and keep your eyes, ears, and minds open. Who knows where the next great idea that will come from that will make your conferences a not to be missed opportunity.

"And also it's a great thrill - you've turned on a whole town. It's a great learning experience. You did it and it worked. It can be really emotional. The exhaustion is something else, but worth it." *Hobart Brown*

Special Edition Issue

☆ **A Unique Experience**

Attendance at an international rally provides food for thought regarding what makes special events work and succeed.

☆ **Creating A Successful Event**

A successful events takes planning, preparation and the support of many people. Some of the issues to consider in the planning process discussed in this issue include:

Attitude	Information
Customer Service	Workshops and Events
Volunteers	Evaluations
Logistics	

☆ **What Next?**

Learn from your experiences. Keep the door open for new ideas.

"...and then, like a miracle, it all comes together, and it really is a surprise, and that's part of the fun." Hobart Brown

The Leipper Management Group at Techcomm Labs is an association management company with over 20 years in service oriented management. We work in partnership with clients to customize services and leverage the strengths of all parties creating a synergy that maximizes overall effectiveness. This is further enhanced by the appropriate use of technology for information management, presentation, and communication.

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