

To news or not to news?

Conference objectives should drive your onsite publishing plan

For your next conference or workshop, a daily newsletter may be one of the best investments you can make. Or it may be entirely unnecessary. Here are some basic questions to help you decide.

How will a newsletter support your conference objectives?

A conference might be designed to reach decisions, deliver educational content, build motivation and team spirit, generate revenue or do all of that and more. The design of a conference newsletter must reflect and support the purpose behind the event — if it doesn't, it's a waste of money and resources. But the good news is that a newsletter format is adaptable enough to suit most meeting objectives.

- For a conference with strong emphasis on education and professional development, a newsletter can focus heavily on written content, with just enough photos and graphic elements to make it attractive to early morning readers.
- A conference that is mainly motivational might feature edgier design, glossier stock, and a higher ratio of photos, to help reinforce the "wow" behind the event.
- For a conference with multiple breakout sessions, an onsite newsletter may be the main opportunity for participants to catch up on presentations they missed — if only because the content in the next room was even more important to them.
- At a multilingual event, a translated newsletter can help organizers build a communications bridge among language groups and cultures.
- At some scientific conferences, organizers arrange to publish abstracts or papers in peer-reviewed journals. A newsletter can

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serve as an essential reference source and action tool in the months between the closing plenary and the final publication.

- At least one international meeting planner treats newsletter content as a vehicle for a 300-word program update in each edition. By commissioning a daily publication that cuts through the din of competing messages, he gives himself a clear channel to communicate schedule changes, ticket deadlines and other administrative items that are essential to the success of an event.

A newsletter probably won't be necessary at a smaller meeting, or at an event that is primarily administrative in nature. And there may be no point producing a newsletter for a very short, one- or two-day gathering, unless the format lends itself to a quick, accessible update.

A guiding principle is that you shouldn't produce a conference newsletter just because you can: Like any other element of an event, you should invest in a newsletter if it will help you meet the objectives that brought you onsite in the first place.

Do you need to capture participants' voices while they're onsite?

For some associations, it is extremely important to show that leadership is keeping in touch with members' concerns. A conference newsletter can easily include a daily series of "on the street" interviews to capture participants' issues in their own voices and demonstrate that they've been heard.

At a larger conference, a newsletter is a great opportunity to build a sense of community and common ground among partic-

ipants from across the country or around the world, through informal interviews and by selecting coverage that reflects the breadth and diversity of the event.

And when participants are expected to learn or deliberate together, a newsletter can set the stage for more productive sessions with better outcomes, by encouraging them to "read in" each morning and get ready for another day of sessions.

How much onsite content does your newsletter need?

Most organizations assume the lion's share of newsletter content should be written, approved and laid out before the event. But that approach misses the energy, uniqueness, spontaneity and sheer adrenaline that drive the most successful meetings.

While some content can and should be produced in advance, participants will pay closer attention to a publication if it reads like a newspaper that is tailored to their event. Usually, you should expect your in-house editor or outside vendor to produce at least 65 to 70 percent of newsletter content while the meeting is under way.

What proportion of the total audience for your content will actually be onsite?

If a conference draws several hundred participants but the host organization has several thousand members, who is the primary audience for your publication? Many conferences make a point of Web-posting the PDF or HTML editions of their onsite dailies. This raises an interesting question: Are there times when the electronic version is more important than the print edition?

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The answer depends on whether the content of an event is of potential interest to an association's entire membership, and whether the association has a need or a mandate to increase conference attendance. In those circumstances, an electronic conference newsletter can be published daily or updated hourly to give offsite readers a snapshot of the content they're missing. The approach can extend the reach of your event, with just enough information that some of your members might regret their decision to skip this year's program — and line up early to register for next year.

Is the newsletter included in your sponsorship package?

Between electronic distribution and the print copies that participants bring home, a sponsor's ad or logo in a conference newsletter survives a lot longer than signage at a coffee stand. Prominent placement in a daily publication can also be one of the benefits reserved for your most generous sponsors or donors.

Do you have the resources to produce the newsletter in-house? Even if you do, do you want to?

If you have the resources to produce your own newsletter, you should keep the work in-house. If you aren't sure, here are some factors to consider:

- If your in-house publications manager is attending the conference to gather content for his or her next edition, does he or she also have time to produce the onsite daily?
- Is your editor staying up until 2 a.m. each night to complete the newsletter?

- Have you assigned the newsletter to someone who could be doing something more valuable — like meeting with sponsors, or interacting with members while they're onsite?
- Will your in-house resources permit you to produce as large a newsletter as you need, with the proportion of onsite content you want, in as many languages as your participants expect?

Of course there are often — but not always — budgetary advantages to using in-house staff to produce onsite publications. But there are other reasons as well. They bring a depth of understanding and nuance that reflects their day-to-day involvement with the association and its issues. And the knowledge they bring back from the conference is bound to help them in their work.

In the end, the decision on whether to outsource a newsletter or keep it in-house should be based on the resources available to an organization and the best way of deploying those resources while a major event is under way.

Is a newsletter the best publication format for your meeting?

Although a conference newsletter is the ideal format for many meetings, it isn't the only option. Depending, once again, on the objectives behind your event, you may get the greatest value from a summary report, a thematic white paper, or some other type of publication.

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A newsletter can be a great tool for building a sense of community among conference participants. A deliberately planned, well-written publication can help demonstrate your interest in capturing members' voices and respecting their viewpoints, while giving people valuable snapshots of sessions they missed.

Like almost any other aspect of an event, there are good and bad reasons to produce an onsite daily. But when you create the right publication and tailor it to the objectives behind your event, a conference newsletter or summary report can bring lasting, measurable results. ■

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