

Meetings & Conventions Magazine

December 2018

The Reviews Are In

How to get valuable feedback from attendees

– BY EMILY CARRUS



It was a unique approach — and one that gave Margie Mauldin pause. During a business program that she recently attended, the event's meeting planner was working the venue conducting short video interviews with attendees using her cell phone. The topic of her questions: how things were going.

"I thought it was really brave," says Mauldin, president and owner of the Denver-Colorado based leadership development firm, Executive Forum, and author of "Feedback Revolution: Boosting Relationships & Boosting Results." "Usually, we want to get challenging feedback on paper so we can read it in private and then decide what we want to expose to the light of day."

Instead, this planner took critique and complaints in stride — and made a fanfare of implementing changes that were a direct result of those interviews. "It was inexpensive and demonstrated real-time to the attendees that their feedback was listened to and adjustments were being made," Mauldin recalls.

Your Attention, Please

Learning of glitches in a program or that things have fallen short of expectations can feel like a personal failure to a meeting planner who has spent months or even years designing an event. But learning to collect, absorb and make good use of feedback can lead to future MICE program success.

"We do an absolutely lousy job of getting feedback," laments John Nawn, the founder of The Perfect Meeting Inc., a meetings design firm based in Chicago. "I sincerely believe that getting feedback — from all of our stakeholders — is the most crucial activity we can perform as meeting professionals for one simple reason. As Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, put it simply: 'If you're not measuring it, you can't improve it'."

While there are certain data and statistics — attendance, for example — that can be gathered without asking anything of meeting delegates, other feedback requires their participation. That's true, particularly, when it comes to surveys — but thanks to modern technology and meetings industry apps that facilitate them, getting responses is easier than ever.

"One great tool is the smartphone survey, which allows immediate, in-the-moment conversations and notifications that can be evaluated for deeper insights later," says Kathy Benson, CEO and cofounder of ORI, a Herndon, Virginia-based research and data analytics firm. "For example, push out one or two short questions at the beginning, middle and/or end of a keynote presentation to gather genuine audience reactions. This approach is quick and easy, but also extremely effective at gathering high response rates and real-time sentiments."

While mid-program surveys can cover lots of topics, Mauldin says they're particularly helpful in the realm of "human comforts" — room temperature, food and beverage services, and the like. "Making it immediate means it's actionable and adjustments can be made," she says. "It's also easier for attendees to address something right then rather than try to remember back to those details 48 hours later."

Of course, any feedback-gathering technique will only be effective if it's comfortable for attendees to use. "Once you've selected a product (or technology)," says Nawn, "make sure your attendees know how to use it."

Push notifications or emailed links can help. To increase enthusiasm, Mauldin also suggests providing incentives: points that acquire for survey participation and can be turned in for stored value cards, raffle entries or prizes from event sponsors, for example.

Not Over Yet

Post-program surveys have lots of potential, but knowing what to ask — and when to ask it — isn't easy. "The typical post-event evaluation in use today across the industry is little more than a performance review for the meeting professional. It asks about 'satisfaction' with registration, accommodations, transportation, and any number of other logistical issues, but tell us nothing — I repeat, nothing — about whether the meeting or event contributed in any way, shape or form to individual or organizational performance improvement," Nawn says. "This gets to the heart of why we're meeting in the first place. If it's not to improve individual or organizational performance, what's the point in meeting?"

To help, Nawn shares freely through his website, thepperfectmeeting.com, a 19-question survey he designed "specifically to evaluate the effectiveness of learning" with regards to educational sessions. He says when respondents understand that performance or contribution is the target of questioning, "they respond in kind."

Mauldin says well-designed follow-ups can yield valuable insight, too. "Where an immediate question you can ask is: Did you learn things that gave you insight and things that you can put into use immediately?," she says, "Six months out you could ask: Do you have continuing relationships with the people you met during this networking pieces of the meeting?"

According to Nawn, research shows that sending surveys out early proves more effective; survey length matters, too. "Don't blame participants for not answering long, boring surveys," Benson says. "Keep the participants' needs in mind so they feel like they have a stake in the survey. After all, it can help craft a better meeting for *them* — it's not their role to make things easier for the meeting planner."

Now What?

When surveys and data have been collected, the challenge for planners becomes knowing what to do with it. Most important, Mauldin says, is making a point to do *something*. "Don't waste your time gathering feedback if you're not going to utilize it," she advises.

The best assessments, says Benson, can happen when all available forms of feedback are brought together. "It's so important to dig deep into the data from all listening posts (overall post-conference evaluations, session evaluations, tweets, texts and interviews, to name a few) and then analyze and review the data," she says. "Whether it involves pulling the data into Excel or a statistical package, it's critical to look at data in the aggregate form and then break it down by tracks, sessions, days, times, etc."

Valuable information can come to light from any source or combination of sources. "Don't forget to dig into the comments," she says. "You'll discover a wealth of information that can answer the 'why,' and this is a very good place to pull out the nuggets."

What information is important and what is not can be hard for one meeting planner to discern, which is why it's critical that feedback be evaluated by multiple entities. "Make sure it's not just one person deciding on what information is valuable. You need to have people looking at the results who have different thinking styles and touch on different parts of a meeting," says Mauldin.

Specialists and consultants may be among them. "Frankly, because of the knowledge and skill involved, it's infinitely easier to outsource these capabilities to an internal or external resource," says Nawn of data analysis. "It's up to the meeting professional to work with their stakeholders to translate those goals and objectives into metrics or measures that can be collected, analyzed and interpreted in order to determine the success of your meeting or event."

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