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How to Engage Members Who Can't Attend the Annual Meeting

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By Benjamin Rabe, CEM and Alexa Newman

As trade show managers, it's easy to get focused on the attendee and exhibitor experience at events and lose sight of the members who aren't able to attend. But by taking some innovative actions, we can include and even engage members who are staying home.



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The American Society for Healthcare Engineering (ASHE), a personal membership group of the American Hospital Association (AHA), encountered this issue. ASHE hosts two annual conferences a year, each averaging 2,000 attendees and over 1,000 exhibitors. However, 6,000 members weren't attending the events – whether it was for budgetary or timing considerations – and ASHE's leadership wanted to find a way to reach those members as well.



After looking at several options for engaging non-attendees, ASHE opted to stream the general session and brief 15-minute sessions from the theater area. Since ASHE's booth is centrally located on the show floor, the team also began broadcasting live footage from the association's booth, including discussions among the advocacy team about the latest policies involving infection control. As a result of its new engagement opportunities, ASHE has extended its conference audience reach by over 10 percent, and this year, ASHE sold a sponsorship to support streaming from the booth, allowing all virtual attendees to attend for free.

After witnessing the success of ASHE's connection booth, the American Society for Healthcare Risk Management (ASHRM) considered increasing the size of its association booth and repositioning it to be the centerpiece of its show floor.

ASHRM, also an AHA personal membership group, chose to focus on its theater sessions. It already had a "bite-size" learning theater, which offered a variety of learning sessions and presentations paid for by vendors and other sponsors. As streaming can be costly, the sessions are recorded and released later in the year on the ASHRM website. This drives traffic to the website in the months after the show when associations typically see a lull in engagement.

ASHRM also is adding a video testimonial area near its booth, where it will conduct man-on-the-street interviews with ASHRM members. They will be asked what they love about ASHRM and why it is important to attend the conference. ASHRM has invited its exhibitors and sponsors to give testimonials about the value of partnering with ASHRM. These video snippets will be used to develop a "Why Exhibit, Why Sponsor" video to be used in 2015 sales efforts as a way to reach potential exhibitors who aren't able to travel to the show in person.

Another great example of engaging members year-round is to provide members with short monthly online sessions. One business trade association provides "up to the minute" quick briefings called "Coffee Breaks." These 20-minute webinars share the latest information, tools, techniques and strategies in the industry. These breaks have counted up to 1,000 members participating.

Telecommunications user groups' mission is to connect their members with product developers, support and other experts. One user community is finding success in a program that provides exclusive opportunities for users to connect with their partner communities. Benefits, which vary based on level of participation, include membership, year-round recognition on the association website, social media posts, notification of chapter events, ads in the year-round publication and the opportunity to present a webinar. The program has seen revenues double in three years.

Associations are continuing to explore creative ways to engage membership, and its members are finding value in the offerings, even if they can't be there in person.

Benjamin Rabe and Alexa Newman are senior managers in Event Services at SmithBucklin, the association management and services company more organizations turn to than any other. For information, contact us at brabe@smithbucklin.com and anewman@smithbucklin.com, or visit www.smithbucklin.com.

Editor's Note: This will be the first in a series of articles from SmithBucklin for TSNN's MedShow Monthly.

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