

■ Planning a Regional Meeting: Not What You'd Imagined but Better Than You Feared

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What is it like to plan a regional meeting? When you are first asked to take on this responsibility, it is flattering, but it is also frightening. If you are an advisor or professor, you likely have no frame of reference for what it will be like. Wonder what it's like? Wonder if it's too much work? Are you interested in participating more on a local, region or national level but not sure what you're signing up for? When we agreed to plan the 2015 NEAAHP Regional Conference, we definitely felt unsure of what exactly we were agreeing to. Spoiler alert: It was a lot of work, but we both are very glad we took on this challenge. Here's what we learned.

Top ten things we learned from planning a regional meeting:

1. Get to know the hotel staff; they will be your best friends before and during the conference.

Site visits are important to learn more about the hotel, area and the hotel staff. The hotel staff, specifically conference services, food services, front desk, housekeeping and AV team will become your closest (and most important) friends for the days of your conference. There are days when you will be communicating with the hotel staff multiple times, and it is important to know them through your visits and conversations. Remember they are here to help facilitate a smooth meeting. These relationships will help when you get a phone call at 11 pm during the meeting about an issue, and you will know who to call. Keep in mind that hotels are run by policies and procedures and no request is as simple as it sounds. For

example, what if you have a room set up with chairs in rows, but the next speaker would prefer tables. Sounds easy? Did you know that changing a room layout can require over two hours for the hotel staff to convert over? That means nothing can be scheduled in that room for that time. For this reason, it's important to stay in contact with the hotel so that you can anticipate any surprises and learn procedures and policies before the conference.

2. Sponsorship is the key to affordable meetings.

There are often questions about the necessity of sponsorships. At this time, the costs of meets are steadily rising, while advisors' budgets are not increasing at the same rate, so sponsorships help to make the meetings more affordable for advisors. Sponsors help to cover the costs of meals, meeting amenities, signs, table rentals, AV costs, and program books, just to name a few.

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Some regions even have sponsors that support travel grants for advisors to attend the regional meetings when they would not have been able to afford it. Sponsorships can be big or small, but all are appreciated.

Sponsorships also allow advisors to learn more about different programs, schools, associations and organizations that are generous enough to donate money to your meeting. Whether it is a presentation at a meal, handouts before a session or ads in program books, these are all opportunities for advisors to learn more about your program and be able to bring this information back to their students.

3. There are a lot of stakeholders in a regional meeting.

Planning a regional meeting involves more than just selecting topics that are relevant to advisors. You have many stakeholders that are involved in conference planning (the hotel, catering, AV departments, associations, schools, sponsors, print shop and more) and their needs and wants have to be balanced with the needs of advisors. When planning, you have to pay attention to your meeting's target audience to ensure quality programming at a reasonable cost, but also be aware of the other stakeholders' needs. For example, it takes a great deal of time to finalize the program book with sessions, speaker information, moderators, room layouts, and more in the last few weeks before the meeting, but at the same time the print shop needs sufficient time to print all the books. With sponsors, associations and schools, you want their presence at the meeting and their participation, so you need to make the meeting worth their time and money. Since regional meetings are held at large hotels, you also need to consider the needs of the hotel and their staff- when do they need final numbers for meals, how many rooms can we secure at our group rate, did you allow sufficient time in the schedule for the rooms to be changed from a lecture layout to a meal, and more.

4. Don't plan anything else in your life for the 3-4 weeks prior to the meeting. It's like planning a wedding!

In the months leading up to the meeting, the mundane, seemingly easy details of the conference become all-consuming: monitoring registration, scheduling and rescheduling and rescheduling rooms for sessions, ordering meeting amenities, finalizing and refinalizing and refinalizing the meeting program and AV requirements. As with a wedding, there is a mountain of minor details that need your attention, many of which can't be done until the last few weeks. The hotel needs finalized banquet orders with not only the meal counts but the number of chairs and tables in every room for each session. AV needs the number and kind of microphones and projectors for

each room for each event. Although these details are not difficult decisions to make, there are simply a lot of them. One of the most difficult parts of planning a meeting is keeping up with the ocean of details that require your attention, without drowning in them. Keep the big picture in mind. Although it's nice if everything goes smoothly, it definitely won't, so don't beat yourself up. Asking the hotel to bring in extra chairs is not the end of the world.

5. Don't change things that work; but experiment new ways for those that don't.

When you volunteer to plan a meeting, you will likely have ideas of things you'd love to do or undo. This is a perfect opportunity to make the conference your own and help us adapt as our membership changes. But be careful. Reinventing the wheel takes time, so keep innovations down to a couple of important topics that are really important to you. A good place to start is thinking about aspects of the conference that work great and will likely to be great for another year versus things that were great once but now just aren't and could use an update.

6. Meetings are wonderful for learning new info and keeping up to date, but don't forget social time (or you will lose attendance in the afternoons and evenings).

Although conferences are a wonderful place to stay up to date, most attendees also use them to network and re-engage with their peers. For this reason, the programming needs to be balanced with downtime and opportunities to enjoy the city with friends and peers. Being cooped up in a hotel for ten hours a day can be tiring, and if you don't offer breaks, attendees will skip sessions to make their own, and afternoon/evening attendance will drop... This year, we planned two fun, social events for the NEAAHP meeting attendees- the Hudson River Cruise and the Family Feud night. Not only did all participants have a good time, but survey results show these events were top-rated.

7. Although it is a lot to plan a meeting, you aren't doing it alone. Planning a conference is probably the most collaborative professional event you will have the pleasure of working on. You will undoubtedly build many new skills and lifelong friendships.

Planning a meeting requires organized planners and a good team of volunteers to help with various tasks of meeting planning. If you aren't interested or able to commit the time to chairing a regional meeting, consider volunteering to help the planning committee with: arranging local professional school tours, AV needs, proposal review, meeting photographer, registration/ check-in table. As

a meeting chair, you will work for many months (and years) with other chairs and meeting volunteers to plan a successful meeting, while also forming solid friendships with other advisors in your region.

8. Ask for help, learn to depend on others, and don't be a hero.

One of the hardest parts of working with others is learning to depend on them, but this is also one of the best parts. Most of us have full-time jobs already that are more than full-time, so it's ok to not do everything yourself. Use those amazing volunteers! And, if you ever find yourself in over your head, say so. No one gets an award at the conference for staying up more nights than anyone else, so don't be a hero.

9. The devil is in the details.

As a meeting planner, you have to always keep an eye out for deadlines and be looking at the details. Remember that everything needs to come together by the start of the meeting, if not before, so once your meeting date is set be sure to arrange your deadlines accordingly. Paying attention to the details will help the event run smoothly and ensure that items and dates are not missed. Details can help to make a meeting a memorable experience, but missing details can break a meeting.

10. Although it is a lot of work to plan a meeting, the 2015 Regional Meeting chairs are working to make it easier.

Regional meeting planning typically requires two years of planning and hard work to execute a smooth meeting. The good news is that the Regional Meeting Planning committee and 2017 Regional planners are working on a guide book for meeting planning that we hope to have "published" and available to incoming planning chairs in 2017 after the regional meetings.

Planning a regional meeting is a challenge and requires a lot of time, but it is a worthwhile experience that makes us better at our jobs. It is very rewarding to see your hard work come to fruition and to hear from attendees about the wonderful experiences that they had at the meeting. You learn a great deal about many things in meeting planning that you can apply to your everyday job: how to balance the needs of others, team work with many other amazing people, organization skills, financial budgeting, multi-tasking and adaptability (not everything goes according to your plan). You also gain a new perspective on what it takes to plan a successful meeting!

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