



## Top Tips for Audience Engagement

By Shawna Suckow

In these days of media overload, smart devices and multi-tasking, our conferences struggle more than ever to capture and hold the attention of our attendees. They'll give us their polite attention for only a few minutes, and if we don't give them rich experiences, they'll leave – either physically, or by diving into their devices for distraction. The challenge is compounded by today's culture, where everybody demands and expects an individualized experience.

What's a planner to do?

Here are some tips you can implement to rev up your audience engagement:

1. In your Call for Speakers, ask your speakers what percentage of their program includes audience participation. Don't settle for less than 25% unless it's a proven keynote speaker. Then ask HOW the audience will participate. Don't settle for a simple show of hands every few minutes – audiences demand more today, or they'll tune out.
2. My research has shown that the magic number is eight. If an attendee meets just eight new people at a conference, that attendee is more likely to feel like he is part of the company or association. He's more likely to engage more fully throughout the conference, and he's more likely to come to the next conference, as well. I work with planners to put strategic networking activities right at the beginning of the event, so everybody meets at least eight people on day one.
3. Speaking of strategic networking, it's important, especially to first-time attendees and introverts. I don't mean cheesy networking exercises (although sometimes, depending on the audience, cheesy is good!). I mean networking with a purpose. Structured networking is well facilitated, full of guidance and activities, so people aren't left to their own devices to strike up awkward conversations at the open bar. It can be completely fun-based, or specific to the goals and objectives of the meeting hosts. Attendees can meet others with similar roles, geographies, or challenges, and have meaningful conversations as a result.
4. There are over five trillion different learner types today – more than there are human beings! One example – some people learn best first thing in the morning, while others learn best later in the day. Offer opportunities for people to connect and have meaningful discussions throughout the day, like informal round table topics at breakfast, or more structured round table discussions as a session during the day.

5. Schedule longer breaks. 15 minutes is not enough anymore, if you want your attendees to truly connect. 30-45 minutes is ideal. Before everyone leaves for the break, I often suggest a discussion topic relevant to a session or speaker. Not everyone may want to discuss that topic, but those who do will be grateful for the suggestion, and will find like-minded others.

The days of back-to-back lectures are fading. Attendees by and large want opportunities to collaborate with one another, share ideas, and work on scenarios to learn new things. Give them those opportunities at your conference, and you'll create year-round fans who will return again and again, and spread the word to others as well.

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