

white space

In the White Space, lofty ideas create innovative actions that lead to distinct success. It is where the science of marketing and visual communication translates into membership growth, improved retention and increased member participation. The best and latest tips and resources related to retaining, communicating with and growing your organization's membership are all right here.

What happened in '09, stays in '09.

Let's leave behind the nightmares of low conference attendance in 2009, and embrace the hopefulness of 2010.

I think we can all say that we are glad 2009 is gone. The economy has affected our jobs, lifestyles, retirement funds and our level of stress.

Articles are popping up all over the place about how various industries survived 2009. From real estate to retail, industry leaders are reflecting on last year and making hopeful projections for next year.

Yet, there is a different tone in the world of events and conferences.

We're gonna guess that you saw a drop in attendance for your annual conference, because we recently read a survey which reported that 71% of associations saw a decrease in conference attendance in 2009. And, some associations saw a decrease of close to 50%!

Very gloomy news. But, the most disturbing part of this survey, completed by various association executives, was that 41% do not expect anything to change in 2010, and 20% expect attendance to decrease again!

At a time when most industries have professionals who are willing to make changes to be successful, association executives seem satisfied to sit back and just let another year of poor conference attendance come and go.

We think that is a lousy way to head into a new year. Instead, we are going to reveal more about what happened in 2009 and identify some conference marketing failures that can be corrected to make 2010 a successful year for conference attendance.



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And the survey says...

(Pull out your stats from 2009 to see how you compare with the association that participated in this survey.)

Here's the TV Guide review of 2009 Annual Conferences:

Attendance was down, sponsorship and exhibitor attendance dropped, some organizations faced attrition penalties, and a few had to cancel their largest, annual meeting.

- 72% of respondents said overall attendance was down
- 36% said attendance was down 20-50 percent
- 75% said exhibitor and sponsor attendance was down
- 42% paid or owned attrition penalties
- 72% had to renegotiate with suppliers because of decreased attendance

It's not fun stuff, and we don't get why anyone would want to have a repeat of that in 2010. Yet, the projections for 2010 based on this survey say just that.

62% OF RESPONDENTS EXPECT TO HAVE THE SAME OR SMALLER ATTENDANCE IN 2010

Yes, 2009 was a bummer, but it is time to get over it, fix the problems and have a successful year.

- Examining how you promoted the event is a great place to identify some solutions that could increase attendance. [Check out our newsletter Positioning Your Annual Conference for Greater Attendance](#) to get started.
- Developing new strategies for member retention and conference attendance are a must during a recession. Listen to our podcast with four innovative ways to increase membership retention during a recession to get a good idea of how to think out of the box.

65% EXPECT EXHIBITOR AND SPONSOR ATTENDANCE TO STAY THE SAME OR DECREASE

Weak attendance and suffering sponsorship and exhibit halls hurt the overall value of the conference because attendees have few networking opportunities. It's the start of a nasty cycle that keeps feeding into the death of your annual conference.

- The quality of an exhibit hall can greatly impact the conference value and attendance. [Crowdsourcing](#) is a great way to ensure that you are pulling in the right vendors.



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86% PLAN TO RENEGOTIATE WITH SUPPLIERS TO MAKEUP FOR ATTENDANCE SHORTFALLS

It worked in 2009, so why not try it again? Over 60 percent of respondents renegotiated with hotels and venues by promising to bring future business. Yet, what kind of business are you bringing them if with each event you have to renegotiate because of declining attendance?

We think your time would be better spent developing a new marketing plan to help increase attendance, instead of letting this defeatist mentality take over as you plan for failure.

- Your new marketing plan should account for more and more conference attendees registering late. *It is not just a trend, and conference marketing has to evolve around it.*

NEARLY 40% WILL WORK WITH CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU TO MARKET DESTINATIONS

Before you make the switch in careers to a travel agent, let's look at how the travel industry is doing.

A survey from Allstate showed that 50% of Americans cut back on their vacation budgets for 2009. But, not everyone did so because of lack of funds. Many did so because it seemed to not be a necessity. When it came down to it, vacations lost their value.

Also, just like your office, there have been cutbacks, people are more stressed and tired. Who has time and energy to even plan a vacation, let alone actually take one?

So, maybe the idea of picking a great location and marketing it, isn't such a great idea after all.

- Instead of marketing the destination, associations need to promote the value of the event. *Listen to our podcast about developing a conference landmark based on event value, not event location.*

82% PLAN TO INCREASE E-MAIL PROMOTION

Um, we can't believe we actually have to say this, but sending 20 poorly-planned and poorly-executed e-mails, instead the 10 poorly-planned e-mails sent last year will not increase conference attendance.

- Instead of communicating more, how about communicating better? Integrating e-mail marketing and direct mail is a great place to start. *Check out our newsletter with tips on how to get started.*



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71% WILL USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE MEETINGS

Well, just like increasing e-mail marketing, social media will not increase attendance or sponsorship if there is not a solid strategy backing it up. Tweeting "We're going to have a conference in beautiful Austin, TX" will not benefit you at all.

- There are two essential tools you need before implementing social media into your marketing plan: a social media strategy and a social media policy.

Read our blog posts to learn the importance of these two documents.

Developing a social media strategy

Creating a social media policy

46% WILL CREATE CAMPAIGNS SPECIFIC TO EACH ATTENDEE SEGMENT THE ORGANIZATION SERVICES

Brilliant! This is exactly what we love to see associations doing, and we would love to work with any group that is thinking this way. We expect them to have great success next year and have an increase in their conference attendance. Congrats!

- One group that deserves to have their own messaging is the younger members in your association. [Check out our field guide to millennials.](#)

It's time for a new game plan.

You knew it was going to be a tough year. But, you picked a great venue, decent speakers, got the best deal for the hotel that you could and followed your standard marketing plan to the tee.

Yet, no one showed up.

Well, it's no surprise to us - and it shouldn't be for you either. And, the same thing will happen in 2010 if you don't take action to change.

When the world is against you, you have to step up your game. There is a lot that you can't control - like budgets, cutbacks and increasing travel costs. But, there is a lot you can control - like, effective marketing that promotes your event as a unique offering.

It's time to step up and fix the problems in your marketing plan, and let the nightmares of '09 stay where they belong...in the past.

