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Through our experience we've learned that if you want to do something well, you have to know something about it. We would like to share some of what we have learned with you. Our newsletter is where you'll find marketing and visual communications topics related to retaining, communicating with and growing your organization's

LATE REGISTRATION IT'S NOT JUST A TREND, IT'S A FACT.

It's time for old dogs to learn a few new tricks.

Forty percent.

If a school teacher had 40% of his class fail, he would find himself in the principal's office trying to save his job.

If an accountant couldn't report for 40% of the budget, she'd quickly be asked to pack her things and leave.

If we lost 40% of our clients, we'd be out of business.

Recently we had a talk with an association executive who saw a 40% decline in attendance from their 2008 to 2009 conference. Yet, this association's marketing team is using the EXACT SAME "marketing plan" for next year.

Einstein's infamous quote defining insanity as doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result comes to mind. By that definition, we could start filling up therapy offices across the country with association executives who are marketing their conferences the same way year after year, hoping for a greater attendance.

In the course of interviewing association execs about conference attendance we heard stories like this one that baffled us to the point of tears. Let's just get this out there. You guys are great. You're organizations do great work. We love ya. But, seriously, some of you don't have a clue about conference marketing! You're using the same marketing plan from 1998 (with the addition of email marketing), despite conference attendance rates falling faster than newspaper subscriptions.

If you choose to stay with the same system you have been using for years and reject change you are choosing tradition over success and greater ROI. However, if you have a vision for growth, the energy for new beginnings and want to see a growth in conference attendance, please stay with us and keep reading.



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Late Registration

Many of you have told us that late conference registration has become a problem when planning your annual conference, and that you'll be happy when this trend is over. Well, we've got some bad news for you. Unlike fanny packs and mullets, late conference registration is here to stay. So, throw a tantrum, have a little cry, reach for the office liquor cabinet...whatever you need to do to shake the fear so we can move on.

We've been talking to association execs about this, doing some research, analyzing human behavior and compiled all our findings here into one easy-to-read, easy-to-share, and easy-to-love edition of White Space. Just like when you're kids told you they wouldn't be seen with you in public if you wore that oh-so-handy fanny pack, we're going to have a tough-love conversation about you're outdated, unfashionable conference marketing efforts.

Top 4 Reasons Why Late Registration is Here to Stay

We've come to the conclusion that late registration is a result of shifts within our culture, it's not a fad that people are doing to appear cool to their peers, or to prove that they are too important to register on someone else's timeline. It's just the way life is these days.

FIRST: Online Registration! It's the way of the future!

Thanks to online registration, gone are the days of having to walk up-hill both ways with no shoes to get to the post office and mail in a form. Without the worries of finding a stamp, or getting a paper cut, attendees can quickly and easily register for your conference with just a few clicks. Your attendees' reaction to the addition of online registration has evolved from, "Wow, you guys are so hip and cool to put this on your website! I can't wait to sign up using that fancy online form!" into, "Ah, I need to register for that conference, but I can do it online...later."

(Please don't be foolish and think that we are recommending dumping online registration. Keep reading to find our tips, how-tos and what-nots.)

SECOND: Travel

A strong motivating factor in previous years for early registration was the necessity to make proper travel arrangements. However, if you've done any traveling in the last, um, decade, you know how quick and easy it has become to arrange all your travel plans online. It only takes a few moments for potential attendees to book their flights, hotel and car rental. Plus, with all the various discount travel websites available, it's possible to still get a great deal on airfare just a couple weeks away from the event.

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THIRD: The Economy

Here's the hard truth, people just aren't sure what's going to be happening over the next few months, and many of your potential attendees may question their job security. Of course this affects future planning of larger expenses such as trips. Families are opting for camping trips and staycations instead of the grand trip to Disney World. And, for you it means that potential attendees are hesitant to commit early. They want to wait until the last possible minute to ensure the conference still fits in their budget.

FOURTH: Oh, those young whippersnappers!

Young people these days, sheesh, who understands them and their lightening fast texting, addiction to Facebook, and complete ignorance on how to use the Yellow Pages! You may not completely understand why they do the things they do, but you know they are full of energy and you want them to be more involved with your organization. And, you really want them to come to your annual conference. But, here's the thing, young people these days don't give two cents about early registration. Your early-bird specials might draw in the older, more established bunch, but the movers and the shakers would gladly pay a higher registration fee to maintain the flexible schedule they dearly love. Also, your younger attendees are not going to register until they are convinced that their investment of money and time is worth it. It's going to take a lot more than a postcard and an email to woo them.

Are any of these fads?

No, they are shifts in culture. (Well, hopefully the economy will strengthen, soon, but consumers will be leery for a while.) Anyway, take a lesson from these cultural shifts as they show that just because things have been done a certain way for a long time doesn't mean it is the right way to do things now.

We need to repeat this:

Just because things have been done a certain way for a really long time, and worked in the past, does not mean they are the right things to do now.

Take what you know about conference marketing, or at least what you think you know, and forget it. Those ideas are more outdated than big hair and tie-dye, especially when faced with the reality of late registration and declining attendance rates.

Deal with it.

You don't really have any control over the reasons why conference attendees are growing more and more comfortable with late registration, but you do have the power to expand your marketing vision to see this as an opportunity. Which means you must adapt your conference marketing plan.



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1. Take your "marketing plan", shred it and start all over.

Honestly, you're falling down on the job if you're not adapting your conference marketing plan each and every year based on shifts in attendee behavior (like late registration), changes in communication and last year's results. Some of you are light-years behind because you are still using a marketing plan that worked back in '95, with the addition of some poorly planned email marketing.

2. Forget the Vendor-Do list.

A marketing plan is not a vendor-do list of brochures, direct mail and emails to be created, it is a schedule of strategic actions each designed with a specific purpose in mind, and supported by research or logic. For example, the Vendor-Do list might include a pretty direct mail piece that will be sent to all potential attendees. However, an effective marketing plan will include research to support how the direct mail piece should be segmented to various groups of the potential attendees to increase response and ROI.

3. Use multi-media late in the game.

The closer you get to the date of your conference, the more personal, interactive and content-heavy your communication should get with potential attendees. Multi-media such as podcasts and videos are great ways to easily share this valuable information. Stop you're groaning that you don't know how to do this, or that you're not tech-savvy enough to do it - worst case scenario is that you'll have to ask your teenager to help you upload your videos on YouTube.

- Let exhibitors create podcasts and videos.
- Have one of the presenters or break-out session leaders create a webinar on the topic they will be discussing.
- Ask a few of last year's attendees to do short video testimonials.

Share each of these on your website, through social media sites and over email in the last few weeks leading up to the event.

4. Get over your fear or apathy towards social media.

Can you think of any successful person or organization who achieved their goals by submitting to fear, procrastination or ignorance? Those are not qualities that tend to lead to success, yet, they are the reasons why many associations avoid social media.





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Word of mouth is strong, powerful advertising, and social media is the most effective tool available to encourage people to start talking about your event. So, what's the problem here? If you're afraid, just jump. If you don't understand social media, read our blog for information and tips. If you're just overwhelmed then hire someone to manager social media for you. You are shooting yourself in the foot by not engaging with potential attendees online through social media and networking. Plus, the longer you wait to join the conversation, the farther behind you will be.

Using social networking/media is key to adapting your conference marketing plan for late registration because it may take a few weeks for the conversations to get going, plus potential attendees will be more likely to engage in online conversations with you as the event approaches. Not sure how you could use social media in conference marketing? Well, we've got tons of ideas, here are just a few:

- Create Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter profiles so attendees can easily share their conference experience with you and others.
- Create a Facebook fan page and update it daily to build excitement about the event, and answer any questions potential attendees may have.
- Give all presenters, speakers, breakout session leaders and exhibitors the chance to interact with potential attendees via video, audio, Twitter, blog, Facebook or LinkedIn.
- Use Twitter and your Facebook fan page to encourage attendees to communicate with each other before the event. The more they publically share their excitement about the event, the more enticing it will sound to those on the fence about attending.
- Upload videos on YouTube of key association staff members sharing their excitement about the planning process, i.e. how they are deciding on speakers, topics and the schedule.

Late registration is not a trend, and you have to adapt your conference marketing plan for it. For most of you, this is going to mean a major overhaul as your conference marketing plans were already lacking strategy and logic.

