

Networking: The Key to Inspiring Better Collaboration September 17, 2007

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Many of us have had the experience of attending a session at a conference where we asked to complete a group task with people at our table. Often we are grouped together randomly and we don't know each other, so we have little context for determining who can contribute and at what level. Also, we are forced to offer our opinions among people we've not previously established trust with ("will they accept my ideas?", "do they have the experience/knowledge to understand where I'm coming from?"). This is especially true if this is your first time at the conference, where you are not familiar with the attendees or the overall culture of the conference.

These group exercises can often seem awkward and artificial, and don't always produce meaningful content. Yet we're seeing this type of format more often in meetings. The intent is good – break up the lecture with opportunities to absorb the content through group discussions and share information with the rest of the attendees. But how can we improve the experience so that it provides enthusiastic participation and contributes to high event satisfaction for the attendee?

If the attendees have met each other earlier in the conference, group tasks become much more enjoyable. Not only do you collaborate in an environment that's more comfortable, you are now reinforcing the connections you've made earlier in the conference. As a meeting professional there are a number of ways you can ensure more and better connections between attendees before they start the sessions.

Design your meeting with ample opportunities to network. Schedule a networking reception before the sessions that require collaboration. The environment for this reception should be conducive for people to approach and talk to each other comfortably, so provide plenty of room for groups to gather and chat, make sure the room is well lit and avoid loud music or other distractions. Remember, the goal here is a relaxed networking environment. If your attendees like to party, schedule an all out bash later in the conference.

Encourage networking with ice-breaker topics, trivia games and "top networker" contests. Enlist your executive team and key members/influencers in your company to actively engage in networking and make introductions among attendees. Pay special attention to first time attendees; networking research shows that this group finds it more difficult to make connections and will feel isolated unless you take action to integrate them into the event community. An easy way to encourage interactions between these "newbies" and the more established members of your group is to provide different colored labels for each

group and encourage the established members to introduce themselves to the newbies.

By providing the right environment for making new connections and reinforcing existing connections, you are not only increasing the likelihood of high event satisfaction scores and making your conference more valuable to attendees, you're also setting the stage for productive and memorable collaboration.