



The Leadership Letter

Plan a Conference? Who, ME?

You've assumed a leadership role in your affiliate and suddenly you find yourself in the role of conference planner. No one told you that, as President, you'd also get to do this job or at least coordinate the effort!

Planning a conference, large meeting or even a Board meeting can be stressful if you don't know the basics and how to organize those planning efforts. Since most of our affiliates have an annual conference and several board meetings during the year, we thought it might be helpful to give you some tips on how to make this a less stressful part of your job.

For most affiliates, the annual conference means several things:

- ◆ You will be selecting a meeting site and negotiating with the management of that site on contract provisions. These provisions range from room blocks, to rental of meeting space, to food and beverage, to audiovisual charges and that dreaded of all concepts, **attrition!**
- ◆ If you utilize a conference planner/coordinator, you will be negotiating a contract, including a fee for service, with that person and outlining the tasks that you expect to be performed. Hopefully, you'll also perform due diligence by checking references and determining if that person has performed successfully in the past.
- ◆ If you're like most affiliates, you're a volunteer association with very little paid staff. That means that the bulk of conference planning and implementation will fall to a group of volunteers, all of whom have lives and responsibilities outside of

this event. You'll either appoint a conference coordinator, a conference committee, or you'll assume that role in coordinating the work of various committees.

- ◆ Contracts for keynoters and other presenters will be negotiated and confirmed. A program committee will review and accept/deny presentation proposals and a schedule for the conference will be developed.
- ◆ Promotion and advertisement of the conference will be developed and methods of disseminating information to interested parties and members will be designed. Someone will be responsible for ensuring that information is gathered in a timely fashion and incorporated into promotional materials and a conference program.
- ◆ A registration system will be designed.

That's just the beginning but don't despair! With a little planning and coordination, it can be a fulfilling, productive volunteer task.

Read on for tips on getting it



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Fabulous but Wrong? Selecting Speakers

One of the significant challenges to selecting speakers for a conference is finding someone who is not only a fabulous presenter but someone who has a message that your participants want to hear. When selecting a speaker, you should consider the following:

- Does the presenter have a style that will connect with the audience? Is he/she engaging and is the message intriguing enough to maintain the participant's interest?
- If the answer is yes to those questions, does the speaker's message fit within the theme of the conference?
- What fees and amenities does the speaker require? If you're booking multiple speakers, will the individual's fee and expenses fit within your overall budget and still allow you to access the other speakers for the program?
- What are you trying to accomplish with the speaker? Is it to introduce your participants to new ideas and research? Do you want to showcase some-

one who can provide content for the classroom? Do you want a recognized name or is your event a showcase for the up and coming professional in the field?

Those questions will help guide you in making decisions. You're not alone in asking these questions and we recently came across some interesting statistics from *Meetings and Convention Magazine*. In an article entitled [Seeking Excellent Speakers: Relevance, Affordability Are Top Priorities for Planners](#), the following responses from meeting planning professionals were enlightening.

Priorities When Selecting a Speaker

91% Relevance to the Audience
71% Cost
55% Availability
53% Recommendation of Others

Other reasons included relevance to current events, recommendations from persons who had heard the speaker, a known celebrity/name, and prior experience with the speaker.

Typical Budget for a Keynote

34%—Less than \$5,000
19%—\$5,001-\$10,000
39%—\$10,001-more than \$50,000
13%—We don't pay speakers

Most Popular Keynotes

77%—Industry related
66%—Leadership
62%—Future Trends
61%—Motivational
40%—Business Skills
27%—Humorous

How does your speaker selection compare?

Source: M & C Research Survey of 117 meeting professionals, www.mcmag.com, March 2014



Removing Barriers for Persons with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that meeting planners accommodate persons with disabilities to the extent possible. In planning for a variety of participants, make sure you do the following:

- ◆ Assess the contracted venue to determine if 1) the venue has made the accommodations necessary to support persons with disabilities, 2) if there are barriers that you can avoid with good planning and 3) if there is a prescribed method of working with the venue to ensure compliance.
- ◆ Be sure that you ask registrants to notify you if they need accommodations. SECA includes this question on the registration form and system.
- ◆ If a participant requests an accommodation, you must provide it. This includes interpreters for hearing impaired participants if requested.
- ◆ Ensure that all meeting space is set to accommodate wheelchairs, walkers and other assistive devices.

[Click here](#) to access an accessibility checklist created by Cornell University Student Disabilities Services.

Take it a Step at a Time!

Planning a major conference can take a lot of time and energy, particularly if it's your first time to be in charge. For most of our affiliates, we're fortunate to have experienced conference coordinators who have performed that task for several conferences and often we find that conference "guru" who's done it many times. For those of you who are new or just need a refresher, let's take a look at these recommended steps in planning a successful conference.

Step 1: Craft A Vision for Your Conference

This is usually a task performed by the affiliate board or leadership. For our groups, it usually takes the form of selecting a theme for that year. For example, in 2015, SECA's theme focused on culture and diversity. The selection of the theme let us design the content of the program, select keynoters, generate partnerships with groups with similar missions and reach out to unserved and untapped collegial groups. Ideally, these decisions are made a year in advance.

Step 2: Create a Business Plan

With this vision comes the task of budgeting, projecting revenue and expenses and anticipating special projects that may require funding for that conference. Unless you're being funded by someone else, the affiliate will bear the fiscal responsibility for all contracts and expenses incurred at the conference. You'll need to figure your ROI (Return on Investment)...are you getting the most "bang for your buck" with certain aspects of the conference? [Click here](#) to view information on what's included and how to create that business plan.

Step 3: Compare Venues and Services

Match your venue to your conference. That means that the space is adequate to host your group comfortably and that amenities in and around the site are sufficient.

SECA utilizes large conference hotels for one primary reason. With the room block and food and beverage expenditures we negotiate, we usually can get complimentary meeting space from the hotel. We're not utilizing a convention center, so we've already shaved around \$12,000-\$15,000 from our conference budget. It works for us because our attendance is somewhere in the 700-800 range. It won't necessarily work for larger groups.

Make sure that your venue is easily accessible (we consider both air and highway), has affordable room and food pricing for your group, is in a location in which participants feel safe and ideally is in walking distance of some type of entertainment/restaurant district.

The point is....negotiate, negotiate, and shop! Meeting venues are competing with each other for groups, particularly in those low occupancy months. See what they can offer and then compare.

Step 4: Create a Checklist

The easiest way to get off track with conference planning is to fail to create that task checklist which clearly delineates who's responsible, what tasks are assigned to whom and when tasks should be completed. The SECA office utilizes a [checklist](#) to keep us organized. A conference planning group with it "all in their heads" probably won't be successful!

Step 5: Advertise and Manage Registrants

Marketing is a key to success and that means that you put out your registration materials more than a month in advance!

You should build interest and excitement in the conference at least 6 months in advance, which means that your volunteers have to get it together and get the work done. Our colleagues have many opportunities to participate in professional development opportunities now. Convince them why they need to attend yours!

Registration is always one of the most challenging aspects of a conference but there are many more opportunities now to utilize on-line conference registration services at a low cost, particularly to non-profits. SECA has utilized Constant Contact to program on-line registration and it is a low-cost way to have your registrants do most of the work.

Step 6: Plan, Plan, Plan

The more specific you are about what will happen at conference, the better the outcome on-site. Communication is a key. Make sure everyone involved knows where to be, when they should be there and what's expected of them. A good plan makes conference a fun, enjoyable experience.



Other Resources



SOUTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION

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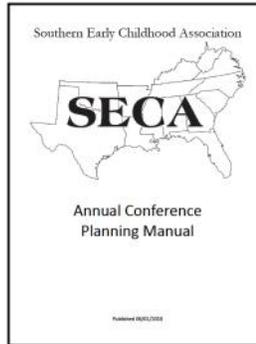
Email: info@southernearlychildhood.org

*Promoting Quality Care and Education for
Young Children and Their Families*

SECA is a "Voice for Southern Children"

*This newsletter is written and produced
by Glenda Bean, Executive Director.*

www.southernearlychildhood.org



available.

If you'd like to access a copy of SECA's annual conference planning manual, including a checklist, [click here](#). You'll find it located on the Leadership Page under the heading of SECA Policies.

[Click here](#) to sign up for notices when a new *Leadership Letter* is

Negotiating Venue Contracts: The Three "Biggies"

With the improvement in the economy (for which we are all grateful), it's becoming more challenging to get the "deal" with meeting venues. At the height of the recession, planners were in charge of negotiating contracts. The tables have turned and the meeting venues are now in charge. That doesn't mean you can't get a contract that will benefit your association and your attendees. It just means you have to work smarter and harder to get the deal that's right for you.

In negotiating a venue contract, here are three of the "biggies."

- ◇ If you are contracting for a room block with a hotel, you need to carefully consider the **attrition clause**. Attrition is the penalty if you don't meet a certain level of rooms booked in the hotel by your attendees. The standard is usually 80% of the room block. (For example, if you booked 900 room nights,

the hotel would expect you to utilize 720 of those rooms or the association will be on the hook for a certain penalty payment.) The attrition clause should contain language that allows the use of the remaining rooms by persons other than your participants and clearly states what you would owe if you don't meet the minimum utilization. Base your room block on past history and contract conservatively. The hotel is usually only too happy to book more than you contracted.

- ◇ **Food and beverage costs** can quickly put your budget in the red. Make sure that you negotiate a sensible food and beverage minimum that you must meet. When you're developing your food and beverage requests, remember that the charge is not just the menu price. There are usually service charges, taxes, etc.

added to the cost. Those additional charges can often equal 30% or more of the menu cost.

- ◇ Don't let a contract tie you exclusively to **in-house vendors of services**, such as audio-visual companies. Make sure you have the ability to compare services and pricing. You may stay in-house but you want the option to make that choice.

