
Organised networking

Some people claim that the most important meetings take place during the breaks. As a congress host you can support your delegates by making room for networking both during sessions and in the social parts of the programme.

Congresses are often run to a tight programme, but there is one exercise you can always find time for, and that's simply "saying hello". Spend five minutes getting the participants to introduce themselves to the 3 - 4 people sitting next to them – it breaks the ice, loosens people up, and can even lead to new contacts.

Use the lunch break

If there are a lot of people gathered that don't know each other, it is a good idea to use the lunch break for organised networking. Divide the lunch area into squares by sticking strips of gaffa tape on the floor and give each square a number. Hand everybody a slip of paper saying which square to be in during lunch. The food served should be easy to grab and eat with your fingers or just a fork. Remember to explain the alternative lunch set-up before the participants go there, otherwise chaos may easily arise. And let people know that they are supposed to have a chat with everybody in their square.

Time to evaluate

At the end of a congress there is often a reception arranged where participants could have a quick drink before going home. This is an occasion that could easily be used to make people circulate, have fun and make new contacts. By combining the reception with an evaluation of the congress, you can make sure that people stay and get talking. Put the participants together in groups of four people that they don't know and hand out a questionnaire to each group. The questionnaire encourages the participants to discuss the lectures, what they got out of the sessions and the congress as a whole, and gives them a chance to share the thoughts and ideas they may have had. It is not so important that the organisers of the congress get the results of the evaluation. The idea is to bring people together and make them stay and socialise.

Focus and sharing of knowledge

If an expert has been flown in at great expense to deliver a lecture, then this person should be centre of attention... or could it be the case that the combined knowledge of the 800 people in the audience is substantially greater than that of the expert at the speaker's stand? At most congresses, the second statement is likely to hold more truth.

Most congresses have too many presentations and participants are too passive. This is not to say that there is no need for experts contributing the latest research results or other information and inspiration. But we get a lot further if we make sure that both the expert and the participants are given the opportunity to share their knowledge with each other and try and further involvement and activity. There are several ways of achieving this.

Remember the breaks

Research studies show that it is impossible to stay focused and listen to a lecture for more than 20 - 40 minutes at a time. You need to be able to pause for moment to reflect and digest the information. This can be allowed for in two different ways. Ask the lecturer to stop talking once or twice during the lecture and let the participants ask questions or exchange thoughts with the person sitting next them. Or you can devote 5-10 minutes to a debate amongst the participants sitting next to each other. This is more effective than leaving the questions till the end of the lecture.

Knowledge "Stock exchange"

Each participant contributes their own special knowledge, and between them they possess a huge bank of knowledge, which should be available to everybody. Spend half an hour or more forming a "stock exchange" for this knowledge, with each participant introducing his or her special competencies. This makes it possible for the participants to seek out those possessing knowledge in a field relevant to them. This exercise cannot be done in too large groups. However at major congress the knowledge bank could be an exercise scheduled in the programme where participants are divided into smaller groups in separate rooms. This exercise is an advanced form of networking where you elegantly jump the initial small-talk to optimise results.