

CREATE & INSPIRE

MEETINGS, EVENTS AND CONVENTIONS

Elevate Your Educational Offerings



Beyond booking a great speaker, here's how to create programs that engage, inform and inspire audiences

by Wendy Helfenbaum

Event professionals have plenty to juggle, including designing effective education programs that balance learning objectives with interactivity, innovation and attendee experience.

"Education is the cornerstone for conferences; it validates the investment, and gives the event credibility," says Karen Norris CMP, director of programs and member services with the Canadian Dermatology Association in Ottawa.

While networking is one reason delegates attend events, Norris sees education as the engine driving attendee engagement year after year.

"Having 20 business cards to show your manager from people you met over three days doesn't necessarily convert to sales, relationships or even a partnership. But what can be used immediately following a conference are the tangible takeaways, skills and mechanics that were taught," she adds.

Of course, this only works if the education is relevant, intentional and nuanced to a delegate's specific area of expertise, she cautions. Here's how planners can level up their educational programs:

SHAPE YOUR PROGRAM DESIGN

Norris suggests examining post-event surveys and evaluations, as well as using multiple touchpoints with members throughout the

year, including surveys asking for topic ideas. "It's important to gather information from people who may not be attending your conference, too, otherwise you find yourself in an echo chamber," she adds.

Through this feedback, Norris' team can evaluate both perceived and unperceived needs. "You may have been planning this conference for 10 or 20 years, but you're not a physician, a construction professional or an engineer, so the content should be developed by experts in that field," she notes. "As planners, we're the experts in distilling and implementing content so it's digestible to the delegate."

MIX THINGS UP

While traditional formats like panels and lectures work well, Norris encourages planners to incorporate unstructured learning and crowdsourcing.

"I'm not a huge fan of turning everything on its head because that goes against some principles in regard to adult learning, but it's up to us to constantly innovate," she says.

"For previous conferences, I've asked my delegates what our debate topic should be, and then everybody feels like they have a vested interest in the outcomes of the session. We're also starting to implement more behavioural science and neuroplasticity into our learning."

Norris likes blending formats and testing new ways of doing things. "Gamification is a perfect example: You can work together in small groups to answer questions through the mobile app, quizzes or competitions," she suggests.

Microlearning helps attendees absorb information in small chunks. At one recent event for conference managers Norris attended, the keynote session featured five speakers who each had six minutes to present a challenge they faced when planning their event.

"Then, we went to a breakout room for the topic that interested us the most to hear more and give suggestions on how to solve it. Back in the plenary room, we all heard how each of those six keynote speakers solved their issue," she recalls. "It was brilliantly done—like a choose-your-own-adventure: Instead of directing me where to go, you gave me the opportunity to choose my own education based on my personal needs and experiences."

Another event saw crowd-sourced topic ideas presented at the beginning of the conference, with the closing keynote featuring tables representing the most popular topics.

"You sat at a table where the topic resonated with you, and I gained more knowledge talking with my peers around that table than I did throughout the three days of the conference," she says. →



CREATE & INSPIRE

We're looking at behaviour change and outcomes—did they leave with skills that they'll use moving forward?

IMPLEMENT HOT TOPICS

Trends in event education strategies are shifting, says Gordon Breault, CEO and co-founder of the Speakers Bureau of Canada.

"It's a very inconsistent time in business itself, which impacts the speakers and topics we book. We're seeing speakers booked that focus on mental health, resilience and managing," he explains. "Another huge push for our speakers is the technology revolution with AI, digital transformation, systems optimization and automation."

Breault suggests thinking about how to transform a standard keynote into something unforgettable. "Before you select the speaker, understand what you're trying to achieve at the event. Get creative with the session format to inspire and provide practical tools that attendees can then walk away with," he suggests.

"The standard 'just talk in front of the crowd' is not completely gone, but people want to learn more. They want to know why they're showing up and they want to implement what they're doing."

MEASURE YOUR SUCCESS BY ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

"You can't just ask, 'Did you like it?'; evaluation surveys need to go beyond that to measure outcomes, so we ask specific questions like, 'Did you learn something new?'" says Norris.

She lists each session's learning objectives in the post-event survey and asks whether delegates learned what they had been promised. "We're looking at behaviour change and outcomes—did they leave with skills that they'll use moving forward?" Other data



points Norris tracks include asking how many useful connections were made, and how many speaker presentations were downloaded via the event's mobile app.

Since survey response rates are generally low, Norris also advises counting the number of people attending each session.

"Even though we may not have survey feedback about a session on psoriasis, if that session consistently brings in 200 people every year, there's your answer—keep offering that topic," she adds.

"The more we talk about the complexity of adult learning and education within conferences, the more we can elevate our profession." 💜

**When your
heart needs
to *race***



PHOTO: @DUBCAPTURES

CHURCHILL

**When your
heart needs
*wonder***



CHURCHILL

CANADIAN MUSEUM
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



PHOTO: JOEL BOILY

**When your
heart needs
to *reflect***

**CANADA'S
HEART IS
CALLING**

MANITOBA

travelmanitoba.com

Melanie Swenarchuk

Senior Manager, Market Development

Phone: +1 204-927-7864

mmswenarchuk@travelmanitoba.com