



Society Strategies

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Set VI Strategies for Program Chairpersons
Increasing Attendance
at Your Seminar or Conference
by Paula Stuart Warren, CG

Introduction

Societies must face the fact that even though your seminar is your main event of the year, and you know it will be a smash hit, there is a lot more going on in the area.

Think about how many times you've read or heard an advertisement for a chain restaurant's seafood night, the department store's semi-annual sale, or the upcoming home improvement show at the civic center.

How can your event compete against these big budget publicity campaigns? Read on for more ideas.

Plan ahead

Contact the speaker twelve to twenty-four months in advance. Planning ahead is the key to everything. Some societies contact a speaker and look for a meeting site about six months in advance of the meeting date. This does not allow enough time to do everything right, to publicize it fully, and to generate enough attendance to break even.

If the event is in need of a large meeting site and the idea is to have a national-level speaker, this may mean beginning twelve to twenty-four months ahead of the event date.

Many meeting places and speakers are booked well in advance; for larger meeting sites there is the competition of weddings, conventions, graduations, business meetings, and other events.

Involve others in the planning process. If the society is a small group, use some regular meeting time to discuss future program topics and speakers.

If your society is large, utilize written surveys to garner program, speaker and meeting site ideas.

It is important to stress that you are gathering ideas and that costs and availability are important factors which the program committee or society board must take into consideration.

You might also read the newsletters and announcements of other societies and the syllabi

from national conferences for more program ideas.

Be cautious

Protect yourself as the program chair as well as your society with contracts or letters of agreement with the speaker detailing arrangements, travel, topics, lodging, fees, and with the meeting site and audio visual provider. Most meeting sites and national speakers have their own contracts.

This will help with your attendance as things will go more smoothly overall, and people will feel comfortable. If things are well run, the registrants will return next year. The speaker will let other speakers know your society is well run.

Publicity is a major key

Another reason for early planning is so you can advertise. A brochure or flyer with only a date but no speaker, topics or meeting site, doesn't exactly cause excitement.

I have seen too many event flyers or newsletter announcements with speaker names or topics TBA. Get the event and go online early to catch those who spend their research time online.

Think about what you are selling (yes, I said selling): the speaker, topics, parking (free, plentiful, or at least the location and cost are well explained) and amenities. What about access by public transportation?

A person who sees the brochure or newsletter might not attend this year, but who now knows about your group and saw the words "annual" seminar or "monthly" meeting.

Use the "free" advertising which can be obtained via the Federation of Genealogical Societies and the National Genealogical Society in their newsletters. There are many event websites, your own society website, and bulletin boards and flyer racks around the region.

You never know who might see that notice and know they will be visiting your city on vacation or while on a business trip and can attend the event.

Think about the number of brochures or flyers, places to put them and plans to restock. Intrigue and excite the possible attendees before they come, while they are there, and afterward.

Use an early registration incentive; perhaps more door prize chances? How about significantly lower fees? Then, have higher registration fees the two weeks before the event and at the door, if space is still available.

Is it different from recent programs? Stress that. Do you sell the speakers and the topics? You may have heard Susan Q. Brown speak and know she'll be a big hit with your society, but do most of the prospective registrants know who she is and her special talents? Tell them!

Does your society keep a mailing list or use broadcast emails for advertising seminars and regular meetings? Do you add new members, purchasers of books, class registrants, people who sign in at the local library's genealogy room; and people whose names appear in the local newspaper who have some historical interest? Take every opportunity to add to your mailing list.

After the event, do those who didn't come read the rave reviews in the newsletter, along with information on next year's big event? They might put it on their calendar so they won't miss next year. Do they know how many freebies were available or about the many vendors selling genealogy publications and software? This also reminds the recent registrants about the great day they experienced.

Does the advertising list a website, email address, or telephone number for more information?

Do you mention the brown bag lunch area and include a list/map of area restaurants? Is there a prepaid luncheon or box lunch?

Do you have some rave reviews from other places your speaker has lectured? Ask for permission to print a couple of those in your advertising.

Schedule a free session at the end of the day. It could be from 3:30 to 4:30 as a Q & A panel (you might even be able to arrange to have the day's speaker participate).

Invite (with a complimentary registration) a couple of area librarians or archivists to the seminar. Build this into each event budget. If they know about the event, they may then mention it to their patrons.

Hold Their Hands

Even though the genealogists should be able to find a tombstone in the middle of a cornfield, they still need help for the meeting. Does the advertising clearly tell where and when the event will take place? Do the directions or map get them to the place?

Ride along with someone who has never been to the meeting place to see if they can find it from your directions before they get into print.

Does the advertising clearly sell the activities, time schedule, refreshments, vendors selling historical and genealogical books and supplies, and the tons of freebies a volunteer has accumulated? Will there be a sale of white elephant genealogical books and CDs?

Have outdoor signs for the parking lot entry, on building doors, and inside, so people know that they are at the right place and can easily find everything? Remember that many of us need signs and maps that are easy to read.

Will the event fulfill the social aspect reason that brings some of the registrants?

Other Preparations in Advance

Make a list of what you need that day: first aid kit, scissors, paper, markers, tape, extension cord, etc. If you and the event seem prepared,

those in attendance will sense it and feel more relaxed, enjoy their day, and be more likely to return.

Work the angles. If your city's mayor is a genealogist, present a free registration and inform the newspaper.

Listen to the local radio hosts; catch some ideas of their passions in life. Maybe it's historic building preservation or the river, or something that when you have a lecture on it be sure to send a flyer. Maybe some on-air publicity will come.

Look at the newspaper columnists. What are their interests? Do you have members who can post flyers at work? I have left behind a flyer on the table with magazines when I leave the doctor's office. Give your new cemetery publication to the historical society and maybe they'll mention your next event in their newsletter.

Does Every Seminar or Meeting Feel the Same? Get Out of the Rut

Have you recycled topic X or topic Y with steadily decreasing attendance? Do ethnic topics work in your area? Would it be a type of seminar you could offer every few years?

It takes money to raise money. Think seriously about whether your plans are too big for your society. Cutbacks may be needed or other funding needs to be found.

Have a board discussion to decide if your society can really afford the money and whether it has the necessary volunteers. You will need to fulfill what you promise in print to registrants.

Genealogical and historical societies and book and supply vendors add to the overall good feeling. Contact area ethnic organizations and repositories. Send invitations to many types of vendors who are reasonably close (within a few hours) of your seminar site. Set reasonable table rental fees.

Some vendors may be able to contribute door prizes if you let them know in advance that the

prize name and the name of the donor or company will appear in your newsletter and day's program. (Don't forget to list them!) Mentioning them briefly during the day is also a plus.

Have free cake for the society's anniversary or some special event. The word "free" works wonders.

Open up a half hour early and have several experienced members handle a Q&A table. For regular meetings have a half hour before the organized meeting for members to come and discuss problems, discoveries, share the reference materials.

Stress this free, added attraction in your newsletter. Offer a beginning genealogy class the night before or early on the seminar morning at no extra charge.

Have gift certificate door prizes for the next seminar or discount certificates to be awarded for this year's first ten or twenty registrants. Let them know they can pass it on to a friend or relative. Advertise the certificates in your newsletter.

Make Your Audience Feel Welcome

Have enough people staffing registration to make the line move quickly. Keep the business meeting short and run it tightly. A big seminar is not the time to have a bylaws discussion.

Introduce yourself and subsequent people at the podium. Welcome both members and non-members.

Have light refreshments. Either include these in the fee or set out a donation basket. Make them feel good by saying cookies are included in your registration fee. (Remember the magic word: "free.")

Start and end everything on time. Have a bell or whistle to remind people ahead of time that a session is about to start.

Don't run out of handouts. Never. Ever. The few dollars to print extras are worth the

goodwill with last minute registrants. The extra printing saves rushing at the event and saves listening to complaints.

Is there a freebies table? Advertise this and remind the audience at the event.

Vendors unable to come to the event may still be able to send flyers, catalogs, pamphlets. These might also be available from libraries, archives, and ethnic organizations.

About the Author

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