



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

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Set VI Strategies for Program Chairpersons

Multi-Track Programs

by Jana Sloan Broglin

Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper describes the planning of a conference setting up several tracks of lectures. This would enhance the seminar experience for your society members, and likely bring in new attendees.

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Set VI Strategies for Program Chairpersons Multi-Track Programs

by Jana Sloan Broglin

INTRODUCTION

The decision is made to hold a major conference. The date is set. The site secured. The committee appointed. All that remains is to select a theme, topics, and speakers. Here are suggestions for doing this as easily and efficiently as possible.

CHOOSE A THEME

Themes are broad subjects that may encompass many different lecture topics. For its 1998 four-day national conference in Cincinnati, the Federation of Genealogical Societies used the theme: "Immigrant Dreams: The Settlement of America." A theme is useful in logo design, the promotion of the event, and the selection of sessions in a multi-track program.

IDENTIFY TRACKS

Tracks are the schedule or arrangement of program slots to be filled with sessions. A

conference may have one or more tracks with titles such as, "International Research," "Records and Resources," and "Computers and Genealogy." Within each track, are sessions which run simultaneously, giving attendees choices for each hour or more of programming. The number of tracks is often determined by the anticipated size of the audience and the number of lecture rooms available at the host facility.

A variation on a multi-track offering is the blended program. This combines single and multi-track presentations. In the blend, a well-known speaker opens and closes the conference with general sessions for all attendees. The interim sessions (sometimes called "break-aways" because they split attendees into smaller groups) are presented by local speakers in a multi-track format.

Blended programs offer attendees the opportunity to hear the keynote speaker yet still choose sessions from two or more tracks before the group reconvenes for the general closing

session. To ensure high quality in this type of setting, give the local speakers a test run before the actual seminar.

OPTIONS FOR SESSIONS

Within each track, the sessions are usually one hour in length. Sessions are specific topics or subjects presented as lectures, workshops, or trips: one presenter (or a panel) in a single time slot. For example, a three-track conference (with tracks titles, "I. International Research," "II. Records and Resources," and "III. Computers and Genealogy") may offer these sessions: I. English Law and Probate, II. The Federal Census, and III. Software for Desktop Publishing, during the first hour.

A workshop is a hands-on experience which may be limited in the number of participants. Often advance reservations are needed with an extra cost per person for supplies. Examples of workshops are: setting up a Web site, how to do on-line family newsletters, how to identify and date old photographs, and techniques for paper preservation.

A trip to a local research center, library, Family History Center, or a historical site or museum, is another option. The trip could be conducted the day or evening prior to the opening of the conference or be a special event on the final night. The 1998 FGS conference offered a dinner buffet and music at Cincinnati's Union Station. The Hamilton Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society hosted this.

Although trips can be led by a group leader who does not give a lesson, workshops and lecture seminars require presenters. The selection process for presenters can be as simple as a committee agreeing on whom to invite. Or, invitations can result from topics submitted in response to a Call for Papers.

CALL FOR PAPERS

A call for papers to be submitted by prospective speakers can be placed in national, state, or regional society publications 12-15 months before the conference date. The call includes the conference theme and the tracks, and suggested possible topics.

A call permits a "blind" choice by committee. A list of speakers' names with a corresponding number is recorded on a separate sheet of paper. Then, all identification except the assigned number is blocked out on the lecturer's submission.

The program committee can then choose on the merits of the proposed topic and content description. After selection, determine if the chosen speakers have additional topics that would be appropriate. Having speakers present more than one lecture helps to keep costs down.

The blind selection method could result in several newer speakers being selected over more experienced presenters. Most conference planners seek a blend of talent: some new, some old. To achieve this, well-known speakers whose submitted topics were not chosen are considered for the keynote address or invited to do a particular presentation.

CHOOSE SPEAKERS

Some considerations in speaker selection:

- **Skills:** does the speaker present well? If no one on the selection committee has observed the speaker in action, request an audio or videotape of a recent lecture.
- **Evaluations or Recommendations:** are evaluations from recent conferences in which the speaker participated available?

Or can recommendations be obtained from your society members who may have attended sessions by this speaker?

- **Expertise:** has the speaker published books or articles on the topic or possess some professional credentials that denote a recognized authority on the subject?
- **Exposure:** has the speaker recently addressed area groups that represent your potential audience? If so, would they attend yet another event featuring this speaker (using the same or different topics)?

CHOOSE TOPICS

If a Call for Papers was used, the program committee reviews the submitted material to be sure the subject matter is appropriate to the conference theme or tracks. If there was no Call, committee members must choose specific sessions to fill time slots.

Mark speakers' names on a rough draft of the program that shows tracks and sessions. Plan so that the speaker gives only one lecture per day (unless the speaker agrees to more).

After choosing and scheduling presenters, notify them. Mail letters of regret to those not chosen. This letter should be polite and encourage future submissions.

Chosen speakers receive a letter of invitation 7 to 10 months prior to the conference. The letter repeats the theme of the conference, gives the location, and shows the names and times of the sessions to be given. The amount of honorarium and arrangements for transportation, meals, and lodging should be stated. The invitation should include the following enclosures:

- the **speaker agreement form** asks for all

contact information (name, address, and day and evening phone/e-mail/fax numbers). By signing this form, the speaker agrees to the terms of payment and arrangements for the conference. Two copies should be mailed: one is for the speaker to keep.

- the **equipment form** identifies in-place equipment, such as lecterns and microphones, extension cords, extra bulbs, and screens. Special needs are to be indicated by the speaker.
- the **speaker biography form** should be returned to the program chair with the agreement form. The information requested may include hometown, education, genealogical experience and special interests, society memberships and offices held, and publications or special projects. A photograph may be requested.
- the **handout or syllabus material request form** gives preparation instructions and preferred length. If these are for a syllabus, include a sample page showing the format requirements (margin sizes, preferred fonts, and type of heading, footers, numbering of pages, etc.).

The speaker's name, address, and contact numbers should be on the heading of the syllabus submission. A statement should indicate if the presentation is geared to the beginner, intermediate, or advanced researcher. The request form should include the deadline date for submission of syllabus material.

MORE TO CONSIDER

Speakers are paid on the voucher system. These vouchers give the name and address of the person to be paid, a list of expenses, and the

purpose of the payment. The speaker enters the date of the session, topic, the amount of honorarium, and agreed upon expenses. The speaker signs and returns this voucher prior to the conference. A paycheck will then be ready for the speaker at time of registration.

Introductions are an important part of any conference. The program committee should arrange for persons to introduce the speakers. A standard format may be devised. It can be very precise: announce the session's number, the subject, and the lecturer's name. Mention can be made that there is more information in the syllabus regarding the presenter. This is the method preferred by most speakers. Otherwise the person introducing the lecturer may become nervous and give a negative slant to the presentation.

PROBLEMS

Ah, yes, problems. No conference goes off without a hitch. Try to anticipate everything that could go wrong. One of the most worrisome concerns is speaker cancellation. If this happens early enough, select another speaker for the same topic and only minor adjustments will be necessary to the published program. If no speaker is available on a specific topic, choose a new topic, even if it does not fit into the selected tracks.

Last-minute cancellations or no-shows present a different problem. The audience may be entering a room when word comes that a speaker has fallen ill and will not appear. The only way to manage this is to have a couple of backup speakers, "waiting in the wings" with a general-interest lecture.

FINAL CHECK

A detail-minded person should do a last-minute examination of each meeting room. This person should be sure that everything is ready to ensure a smooth presentation:

- the requested equipment is in place and in proper working order
- there is fresh water and a glass available
- the introducer is ready to begin
- the speaker has arrived, approved the set up of equipment and location of the lectern, and made any preparation necessary for the audio or visual part of the presentation

Now, take a deep breath, and enjoy the conference.

[Jana Sloan Broglin was on the program committee for the 1998 FGS/OGS conference and was the Ohio Genealogical Society's program chair in 1999. She will be conference chair in 2002 for the OGS conference in Toledo, Ohio.]