

4 Ways To Boost Attendee Education

By Terah Shelton

Let's face it,

attendees are often distracted when in meetings. Some are paying more attention to their phones while others are daydreaming and doodling. That's no way to learn, but for most us, paying attention is a challenge.

Ralph Burns, professor of English at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, recently conducted a study on adult learners, finding that the bulk of information that students were able to recall was received during the first five minutes of instruction. And, Burns noted that lowest level of retention occurred between the 15- and 20-minute mark.

Even more, a study conducted at Simon Fraser University found that people had an average continuous attention span—the amount of time that a person can focus on an object without any lapse—of eight seconds.

So with it so hard to capture people's attention, how can you help facilitate attendee learning? Conference Center officials like Eric Whitson, director of sales and marketing at The National Conference Center (NCC) in Leesburg, Va., shared with us some best practices for accelerating attendee education.

1 Book a focus-friendly venue

A conference center is essential when learning is the goal, Whitson said, noting that the environment of a conference center is designed specifically for learning. "Regardless if it's a stand-alone center or one attached to a hotel or a resort, make sure your training session is not next to the pool, next door to a brass band, or viewing a golf tee through floor-to-ceiling windows," he said. "If so, you may want to just save your money—learning won't happen. My advice is to seek out a true conference center, especially if learning is the goal."

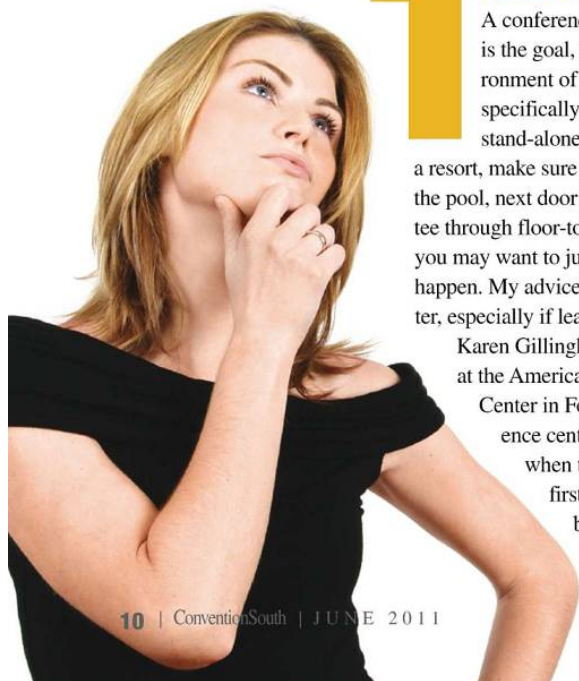
Karen Gillingham, director of sales and marketing at the American Airlines Training and Conference Center in Fort Worth, Texas, agreed that conference centers are one of a planner's best bets when the content of the meeting comes first. "From personal experience, I've been in meetings held in a section of a ballroom with a loud group on

the other side while I tried to concentrate, and have uncomfortably sat in banquet chairs for a full day of meetings," Whitson said. "Because I have been working at International Association of Conference Center-approved conference centers since 1989, I am particularly sensitive to how the environment affects my own learning."

Dr. Jean Hurst, director of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus Conference Center, said conference center staff know how to facilitate attendee learning. "A conference center team understands the importance of helping the meeting planner achieve success and exceeds their expectations." >

Tip: For general educational goals, some conference centers provide pre-set training programs to meet a variety of a group's needs.

Learning
In
Progress



CONFERENCE CENTERS

2 Keep it comfortable

With proper lighting, acoustics and ergonomic furniture, you can help minimize unnecessary distractions caused by related discomfort, said Dr. Jean Hurst, director of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus Conference Center, adding that comfortable seating is a must as it assists with the distraction-free environment and allows the attendee to be more attentive versus the continuous shifting in the seat.

“Ergonomics have long been part of the conference center learning environment philosophy,” Whitson said. “This is about posture, comfort and getting oxygen to the brain. Much of the training sessions we host today sets up in ‘team tables’ with five to six participants on a team, allowing easy flow for full-class interaction as well as smaller group discussion and work.”



Tip: Whitson recommends visiting www.Steelcase.com for information and trends on ergonomics as it relates to improved learning environments. “They have studied that chairs purposely set at high table height found significant better interaction and alertness among participants.”

3 Warm their bellies with good food

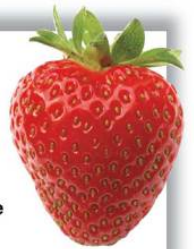
Providing food that will keep attendees alert helps enhance the learning process. “Our recent white paper, ‘The Science of Food for Thought,’ focuses on exactly this issue,” Whitson said. “The three big points are: avoid sugar and the crash you get later, keep it light, especially

at lunch, and keep it local to maximize the important nutrients (and make it taste better, not to mention helping to save the planet).”

Gillingham agreed, adding that their cuisine is created to assist in nourishing the mind to stay focused in sessions.

“We have recently redeveloped our break stations to using thoughtful foods that include local artisan, house made, gluten-free, organic products,” she said. These items are slower burning carbohydrates and proteins—such as whole grains, proteins and nuts. And eliminate prepackaged goods, she said. “What we are trying to do is not banish people from eating Skittles and Coke but offer a more robust menu that keeps the guest healthy, attentive and energized throughout their meetings.”

Tip: A platter of fruit with all colors of the rainbow is said to improve brain-power. Blueberries are known for improving motor skills and learning capacity while strawberries improve memory recall.



4 Use tech tools that attendees can interact with

Good audio/visuals aid in keeping the attention focused and are extremely effective, Hurst said. It has been proven that the most effective learning takes place when all of the senses are engaged: sight (a picture is worth a thousand words so limit the words in a Power Point presentation), sound, touch or other senses as the involvement demands, she said.

“Attendees have other distractions going on in the mind or from other tech tools they carry with them such as text messages or phone calls,” she said. “Using the very tools that create distraction can be a means of bringing the focus back to the message at hand.”

Whitson also advises meeting planners to consider other technology issues such as the use of social media and how it may

facilitate a blended approach to training; how to allow participants to craft the discussion and network before, during and after the actual meeting; and how smartphones and iPads, or other tablet devices, may be used to add to the learning process.

Hurst said 3D is one of the hottest trends in adult learning. “In a recent presentation, the speaker used 3D glasses to demonstrate the value of this tool to enhance learning, especially in the sciences, and to facilitate more efficient ways of working on equipment or performing a delicate operation,” Hurst said. “It has been proven that such a tool not only engages the most unengaged (sometimes referred to as at-risk students) minds but also improves the learning ability of the engaged mind.” ■



Tip: If attendees will be connecting to the Internet, make sure the facility has the bandwidth to accommodate the group’s need, Whitson said.