

Experience Events – The Future Of In-person Association Chapter Events



Recently some of our clients shared that their association chapter members are asking for more in-person events. In response, they are holding them but are often surprised when the people clamoring to attend in person don't show up.



Where's the disconnect? In-person events are in-person events, right?

That couldn't be further from the truth. The general cliché "build it and they will come" doesn't work when it comes to getting members to attend in person. With the number of events they can choose from -- networking, education, advocacy, general meetings, conferences and plethora of easily accessible virtual events – just holding an in-person event may not be enough to get them to choose yours.

Some association chapters are rethinking what they've been doing and have been turning some of their events into association chapter experiences. Events and experiences are two very different things; experiences are a highly effective, fun way to bring in members and connect them to chapters.

What is an association chapter event?

Traditional association chapter events don't require much action on the part of attendees. Members, member guests and sponsors get an invitation and reminder or two. They register, show up, talk to a person or two, listen, and leave. Maybe they take a copy of your PowerPoint presentation, some

business cards from people they meet, and a chapter pen or koozie. The planning and execution that goes into these tend to be similar for each– send emails or maybe a postcard, find a speaker, get a caterer, create a PowerPoint presentation, etc.

What is an association chapter experience?

Association chapter experiences are much more active on the part of participants and the planners. The word “experience” lets attendees know they’ll be engaged using different senses and in a variety of ways.

Every interaction is part of the experience, from when they first learn about it, to the takeaways and the conversations they have after it. Association chapter experiences give attendees a way to enjoy themselves while learning and connecting, by creating emotions and feelings, and memories that last much longer than those of traditional events.

When you plan experiences, you’ll consider what you want the person attending to feel while they’re attending, and what you want them to take from it, which will hopefully be much more than a stack of business cards. How many attendees remember the specifics of your November 2022 networking event? Probably not many. But if you’ve successfully planned and carried out a chapter Whiskey tasting, tablescape competition or author Q&A, there’s a good chance they’ll take away from the experience what you wanted them to, and a whole lot more.

Turning standard events into successful association chapter experiences

The options for association chapter experiences are endless! Clients have shared a number of their recent experiences, including a hike with a presentation from a biologist and a pontoon board ride with an explosives engineer that included visiting different mines and watching small (safe!) explosions.

The American Institute of Wine & Food, Wichita Chapter held a bourbon tasting with a conversation about trends in bourbon. After a brief talk exploring the differences, similarities and producers of bourbon, their expert guided attendees through a tasting of bourbons paired with food to really enhance the flavors of America’s whiskeys. The combination of bourbon, food, education and conversation was a great way to increase excitement and engagement around what could have been a straightforward lecture.

We spoke with Beth Bower, chairman of AIWF Wichita, who explained, “We have a lot of competition in the area, with over 100 wine groups alone. It is important for us to stand out in the experiences we



provide for our members. We take suggestions from members, keep things creative and provide considerable value for the money.” The AIWF Wichita events frequently sell out and their members can’t wait to see what they come up with next.

The Greater Atlanta Chapter of NACE (National Association of Catering & Events) is holding a tablescape competition to see who can design the best table design for an event. (Check out an interview with Sarah James, former NACE Alamo program chair and now a member of the NACE national board, where she discusses the importance of engaging a person’s senses at an event.)

Determining the experiences that will engage your members

To create the right association chapter experience event, you need to know what members want to learn and what inspires and motivates them. Once you know whether they’re looking for -- education, networking, advocacy or a combination -- figure out how to meet those needs with an experience.

To cultivate the right experience, start by asking your association chapter members questions they might be surprised to see, like:

1. Do you like to hike?
2. Do you consider yourself competitive? What does competition look like to you?
Give us some examples.
3. What are the next three business books you want to read?
4. What’s something you really want to learn – work or non-work related?
5. What kinds of things do you do outside of work?

We’re not suggesting you run to hold a bourbon tasting or a hike or change all your events to experiences. That might not work for your chapter’s membership or your limited chapter association budget. But there are plenty of ways to dip your toes into the experience waters, to maximize the engagement of your audience and better connect that audience to your chapter. You could try doing something a little more traditional with an experience “twist.” Is there a speaker your members really want to hear? Bring that person to an in-person event and live stream it but add exclusives just for those who attend in person. Provide those watching virtually with only a 10-minute Q&A session, while those in person get a 30-minute Q&A and a signed copy of the speaker’s book.

We hope the experiences of some of our clients will spur your association chapter to hold some of your own. Now, run out and experience big things!

