

Holding Neuro-inclusive Events That Deliver For All Association Chapter Members



You may not know that 20 percent of the US population is neurodivergent. Merriam-Webster defines neurodiversity as “individual differences in brain functioning regarded as normal variations within the human population.” Examples of neurodiversity include autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and dyslexia.



Many association chapters set up their in-person, virtual and hybrid events to meet the needs of those they think will be attending. That can work, if you get it right. At the same time, not really understanding and meeting the needs of those who are actually in the room could mean you’re not engaging in the right ways with those who are there. When that happens, some attendees may stay in the room (or on the virtual meeting platform) but instead of actively listening, they’re needs aren’t being met so their engagement is limited. However, some may also leave and never come back.

To connect with your neurodivergent members and member guests, you’ll need to pay a little more attention to all that goes on before, during and after your association chapter event. Neuro-inclusive association chapter events are set up and executed to engage everyone who attends, especially those who learn and experience things differently. Here are some ways to make your events more neuro-inclusive, while at the same time, making the event better for everyone there.

3 ways to create neuro-inclusive association chapter events

Provide detailed event descriptions. For most members and member guests, neurodivergent or not, providing details about your association chapter event will make it easier for them to decide if they want to attend. Providing that information also can increase the chances that they'll have the experience they expect, and you want them to have, once they get there.

These details can help decrease the feeling of anxiety that many people experience walking into an event. Here are some things potential guests may be thinking about that you could answer with a complete event description:

- What is the format of the event? Will it be a single speaker? A panel discussion? Some sort of hands-on event?
- What kind of food will you serve? Will there be a place for me to eat on my own if I choose to? Can I bring my own food?
- Is there a quiet space that's easily accessible if I need some time alone during the event?
- What will the lighting be like?
- Will it be loud? Will there be music?
- What are the seating options? Are we sitting at round tables, long tables, couches?
- Will there be breaks during the event to process all I'm learning and all that's going on?
- If there's going to be a presentation, will it be closed captioned?
- Are there materials I can review before the event, like the slides, reference materials, the speaker's bio?
- Will there be any adaptive options?
- Can I see the space before the event?

Give your speakers/presenters some guidance. They may or may not be familiar with presenting to those who are neurodivergent, so speak to them (or at least give them a handout) ahead of time about what they could expect. And provide some thoughts and ideas for managing things they may not have experienced before. Be sure to share with your speaker(s) that they can't expect everyone to act in ways they consider appropriate.

Some attendees may have challenges that can be met with some small adjustments, like the following:



- Some people who are neurodivergent do better with presentations that are multimodal (incorporating different ways of presenting). Your speaker may want to incorporate multiple styles like storytelling, Q&A and hands on/small group activities.
- Rather than delivering only narrative content, add facts and figures. This will allow some in the audience to relate to and understand better than just words.
- Always use a microphone, even if they think their voice is strong.
- People who are neurodivergent may not react the way you expect them to when they hear things directed at them. Presenters shouldn't call out those who get up and walk out during the presentation. This includes joking that they're leaving because the presentation is bad. It's impossible to know why someone is leaving.
- There could be people in the audience wearing headphones, while others may be fidgeting.

Ask for feedback. You can't know how well (or how poorly) you're doing setting up association chapter events for your neurodivergent audience unless you ask. Work feedback into your planning for any event you hold. For the biggest, most honest response, ask everyone who attended — members, member guests, board members and even sponsors — what they thought. And ask them in a variety of ways. Surveys are effective but consider giving people other ways to respond, like interviews, focus groups, and even emails with questions. Use a combination of multiple choice, scaled and open-ended questions that require a written response.

Executing neuro-inclusive association chapter events may sound like a lot of work. Instead of looking at it that way, watch what happens when you reframe the reason for that work. Think about the outcomes of more engaged and less anxious attendees. They'll be more available and interested in learning and connecting, and all of those improvements and the work that went into making them, will be worth it.

