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# THE "FREE" LUNCH MODEL

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## AND WHY IT DOESN'T WORK IN YOUR ASSOCIATION

*That "Free" Lunch may be costing your association chapter more than you know.*



## WHO SHOULD USE THIS GUIDE?

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This eBook was written for association chapters that don't charge for meetings or include the meeting fee in membership dues. Even if you charge guests or non-members a little bit to 'cover' the food at the event, this is still an eBook you should read.

The **"Free" Lunch Model – offering free admission to event attendees** – is often done because chapter leadership believes that no one would come if a charge was implemented, even a small amount above the cost of the lunch. They think that if they charge for the event less people would come.

## WHAT TO GAIN FROM THIS GUIDE?

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In this eBook you will learn why the "Free" Lunch Model doesn't work. That if you believe that the meetings and events have any value above a small get together with friends, then there should be a charge to attend. **Don't sell your chapter short.**

You and your fellow volunteers are spending untold hours planning these events. Charging for events will result in improved attendance levels, activity, and membership value. [Click here](#) to learn the 8 ways to eliminate the "Free" Lunch Model.

**Could you imagine the Event Chair on your board saying this?**



"We can't charge for the valuable content we spend time developing..."



The current “Free” Lunch Model doesn’t work due to one strategic flaw! As the saying goes, “There is no such thing as a “free” lunch”. Local association chapters need to charge for meetings and events to establish value.

What fears are stopping your chapter from charging for its meetings and events? The fear that no one will want to pay? The fear that no one will show up? You cannot grow an organization this way. Be bold, make the decision to find out what the members want and value, produce this value as an organization, and then charge the appropriate amount.

### **What is Appropriate?**

Beginning with modest registration fees is an excellent start. If you have been charging zero, start with a \$15 admission fee. It is below the national average but less of a shock. If you are charging some for the food, then just add \$10 to it for the event registration. It’s important to add on an additional \$5 for non-members to attend, this is a good place to start. This is important to reinforce to members that they have membership benefits and that non-members should join to get those benefits.

# SPONSORSHIPS AS A COMMON TRAP

**Do sponsors pay for meeting costs such as food, presenter, and venue?** If so, great. But, there is still a reason to charge members and non-members even if expenses are paid for.

**Not charging takes away from the value of the content presented, even with sponsorship.**

## KEEP IN MIND!

A major goal is to have as many of your members and non-members attend these events. Chapter leaders have to ask themselves: does the “Free” Lunch Model of not charging for events help the chapter grow, survive, or decline from year to year?



Chapters exist to provide value to their members and to grow the membership as large as the industry/profession allows in a particular geographic area. You know how to provide value. You wouldn't be a leader in the chapter if you didn't understand the industry or profession and get what the association brings to the table. It has to be mix of education, networking, career advancement, social outlet, or legislative outlet.

Providing this value comes at a cost to your chapter and to its leaders. If you have a tiny budget, whatever level of value you are producing is coming through time

volunteers donate to the chapter doing the work. It's like “**sweat equity**” – the input of toil and labor beyond financial contribution. It works to get things going, but it is hardly sustainable because it is 100% dependent on finding volunteers with the desire, ability, and time to complete the tasks. This won't happen if value is lost by continuing to implement the “Free” Lunch Model of chapter management.

There needs to be a fee charged for the events organized, even if all the actual costs are covered by sponsors. This fee is your best form of feedback that people actually do value what the chapter is doing.

All the time that the board spent on running the chapter creates value and that value is actualized by people paying for the event. And yes, more than just what the event costs the chapter for the day.

**Event attendance fee is your best form of feedback that people actually do value what the chapter is doing.**

**Don't just slap a fee for the same old meeting and expect things to turn around. You won't see higher attendance by simply charging for events. Add some twist to increases value.**

**Reinvest the extra charges to cover the costs of the next better meeting.** This is the meeting you wish you could have, the one with better speakers at a better venue with better food – all to attract more members and guests that could (oh yes!) become active members and grow the chapter even faster.

What’s the worst that will happen? If everyone balks and says “we’re not paying anything for chapter meetings”, then guess what? They don’t see any value in it. They just want the free lunch and that is a different problem. Maybe some will actually say that. If they do, **take a look at what they would pay for.** Ask them in a survey to tell you what they would pay for or what they have paid for in the past to gear your events around similar offerings. Your members will tell you because they want to get value from their membership. All you have to do is make it happen and charge them accordingly.

Don’t think of charging as an all-or-nothing framework. Charging for meetings is only one part of the solution. **Set different price rates** for members versus non-members. Utilize early bird pricing structures. Break up services into categories, with a piece by piece pricing to offer options. All of these choices need to be based on what member (and non-member) attendees have actually said they value, would see value in, and would pay for.

**Start reasonably just to get the ball rolling**, with steady increases to match the determined value of chapter offerings. It would be surprising to learn about a chapter that noticed a drop in attendance after increasing prices from \$20 or \$30 for an event. In fact, that’s an opportunity for the chapter to attract more people than ever, as they show up to see what this new meeting type is all about.

## How to eliminate the “Free” Lunch Model?

- 1 Recognize the “sweat equity” that goes into events
- 2 Charge for meetings and events
- 3 Start with a small admission fee and then set incremental price increases
- 4 Survey members to know what they value
- 5 Build in extra content (and value) for future meetings
- 6 Get sponsorships to defray costs and build up funds for the future
- 7 Vary the price by attendee status
- 8 Encourage early registration with an early bird pricing

Once you charge for events, people can equate a value to attending them. There is truth in the idea that free may, and often does, equate to no value. As a chapter, it should provide valuable

information meant to enhance the professional lives of its membership. That doesn't mean free. Finding the balance will take time – but charging is essential for growth and sustainability.

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Request a live demo to learn how to easily manage new event registrations, get more people to attend meetings, increase revenues, and grow your association chapter today.

**REQUEST A LIVE DEMO ►**



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