

Getting the Most from the Conference Planning Ahead Makes a Difference by Del Suggs

Whether its the APCA National Convention, a Regional Programming Conference, a Leadership Conference, or the APCA Campus Entertainment Summit-- you will likely be headed to a multi-day event this Spring or Fall. I've attended more conventions and conferences than I can count in my years serving the college and university market. I've learned to not only survive, but to flourish during these marathons.

I will occasionally see a school attending a conference who just seems absolutely clueless. They will wander the exhibit halls, aimlessly gathering promotional material. They will attend Ed sessions, often with the entire delegation at the same offering. They will attend some showcases, but leave early or come late. Why do they even bother?

The APCA Conferences and Convention have so much to offer they can be overwhelming if you aren't prepared. There are artists and agents to meet in the exhibit hall. There are amazing acts showcasing three or four times a day. There is an entire curriculum of educational programs presented every morning. And that doesn't begin to touch the block booking, cooperative

buying and networking opportunities.

Consider this column a primer, a chance to get ready for the conference. Hang on to it, because even if you're not headed to a conference this month, you know you will be going to one soon.

Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail

Begin your conference preparation while you're still on campus. And not the day before you leave for the conference. Anticipate the conference at least a month in advance.

Choose your delegation based on service to your board and potential. It's a shame to bring a graduating senior to a Spring conference just as a reward-- unless he or she has been an exceptional leader, and will be helping the other delegates learn the skills they need. Make sure your student delegates know that they are coming to work-- not just party. They will have plenty of fun anyway.

Make sure your student delegates have permission to miss their classes, and prepare a letter explain their absence. APCA offers a terrific template that you can submit to their professors.

Meet with your student delegation, and share the conference schedule with them. Help them to understand concepts like packing lightly, and temporary roommate issues.

Download the advance copy of the actual conference schedule from the APCA website. Look over the educational sessions, and make assignments. There is rarely a reason for more than one delegate to attend the same session, and there are plenty of good sessions to go around. Ask every delegate to take good notes at the sessions that they attend, so that they can share the information with the rest of your delegation.

Get a basic understanding of your delegations dietary needs and restrictions. You'll need to be aware if you've got some vegetarians or vegans in your group. Even more difficult are the finicky eaters, those who only eat hamburgers or other very restrictive diets. Be grateful if your students are omnivores-- I've seen students separate each piece of food in a stir-fry dinner to make sure the broccoli didn't touch the carrots! It's good to have a handle on all of this when you begin to plan your non-conference meals.

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Check out some legendary food options when you travel. They aren't always expensive five-star establishments. For example, a trip to Atlanta isn't complete without a chili dog from the Varsity. Even in New York City, you've got Gray's Papaya and the Papaya King (if you don't know, ask!). It's fun to eat like a local!

Get There Early

You should always try to arrive at a conference the night before it begins. I often see delegations arriving late on the afternoon of the first day. They have already missed so much of the program, it seems like a shame that they didn't plan on getting to the conference ahead of time.

If the conference is in a popular tourist site, such as New York, Las Vegas or Orlando, you might want to arrive even earlier than the night before. Take advantage of the special low conference rate you have at the hotel, and enjoy the town before the conference begins. Travel policies vary from school to school, so make sure you aren't violating any rules. It often makes more sense to arrive early than to plan on staying a day later. After the conference you're already exhausted. Better to have your fun before the work begins.

When early registration opens on site, go ahead and get your conference materials. Hold a delegation meeting to distribute the name badges, programs, and goody bags. You might want to hold the meal tickets and plan on passing them out just before each conference meal.

Sit down with your delegation and go over the schedule. Note if there have been any changes since you downloaded the advance copy. Make sure that all the morning educational sessions are assigned, and that everyone has some place to be.

Meals and Networking

The conference meals can be a great time for networking with other schools. This is when you finally get to meet the Director of Student Activities from the other college in your town, or the university in the next city. Why is this important? Let me share a few reasons.

When you want to book that incredible act you saw showcase, but you need one more school to get the best cooperative price-- you call your new friend. When your best student leader is graduating or transferring to the university and needs a job reference-- you call your new

friend. When you can't get students to come to your events, but you know they are attending the shows at the other schools-- you call your new friend.

That's why we make friends and network. Your new friend may have solved the problems you currently face. Your new friend may need some new (and experienced) blood on their board just when your best student leader is transferring.

Scour the Exhibit Hall

Delgates often have a tendency to look mostly at showcasing acts. I encourage you to dig a little deeper in the exhibit hall, and look at the other artists who are represented there. Talk to the agents and self-represented acts at their booths. You may find that perfect act for your upcoming Parents Weekend, or a speaker for your Leadership Conference, that didn't actually perform at this conference.

It takes a lot of effort and determination to really work the exhibit hall. Understand why you are there-- to learn about as many acts and attractions as you can, and to gather their material to present to the rest of your delegation.

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Be respectful of your associate members in the exhibit hall. Your entire delegation may just love a particular act. But don't take advantage of the situation and ask for five copies of their latest CD! The standard rule of thumb is one complete presskit and disc per campus. Try to be good about not hoarding the promotional material.

Have a plan. Look at the exhibit hall layout, and do some calculations. Perhaps you can plan to cover an entire row of exhibitors in each exhibit hall time. You might want to start in the back and work your way forward, as other schools may try your idea and start at the first row, too!

Understand Cooperative Buying and Block Booking

Coop buying and block booking are the keys to saving money with your programs and events. The idea is simple: the more consecutive dates in a particular area an act books, the less expensive it is for them to travel to the shows. So the savings gets passed on to the schools. I always say it's like buying a case of canned tuna at the warehouse club and sharing the cost with your friends. It's cheaper than buying 12 separate cans!

Don't be afraid to submit forms. If you only check "AI" (Attraction Interest), then you're under no contractual obligation to book the act. It does, however, get the act up on the board for others to consider. If you submit an AI form, the school in the next town may decide they want the act, too. Then you've almost got a block. One more school, and you'll get a reduced (3 out of 5) fee. That can be a big savings.

But use your cooperative buying wisely. A school can always get the date it wants, or the price it wants, but challenge is getting both. Understand that you probably can't move your Homecoming concert date, and you may have to pay for an isolated (full price) date. But if you submit your form, the other schools in your area may help you form a block.

Try to get the wisest deal, too. For example, you may be better off paying \$100 more for a small act to get the date you want. But if you take an alternate date for a big act, you might save \$500! It happens all the time.

Bring Your Calendar, Too!

Look at your program needs before a conference, and bring along your calendar. This is the best time to schedule your programs.

Think about it: you've got the agent there, you've got your delegates there, and you've even got access to neighboring schools to build a block of dates. Plan on booking your semester at the conference. Take advantage of the situation-- it's actually why you came to the conference!

Okay, that plus the free CDs.

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