



Planner's Workshop: On Site: How to Link Learning and Networking

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It is your most important meeting of the year, one requiring a good portion of your budget. A great deal of time and effort has gone into developing thought-provoking concepts and presentations that truly address the latest issues. Yet, you still wonder if you have done everything you can do to ensure maximum learning and understanding for your audience.

Content that is new and complex, no matter how well presented, does not immediately insert itself in the adult learner's mind. An idea needs to be processed—compared to long-held beliefs and other knowledge—before it can influence a person's perspective. Often, the give-and-take of discussing and knocking around new concepts with people you respect and trust clarifies thoughts, making new content more concrete, applicable, and memorable. In short, learning does not completely take place during a presentation. The period after the session—when attendees candidly and openly dialogue with each other—is critical to learning.

Therefore, to accomplish learning objectives, an event program organizer needs to facilitate both on-grid and off-grid learning.

On-grid learning is typically manifested in a structured meeting: an instructor talking before an audience, whether in person or online, presenting new information and concepts. Off-grid learning occurs with attendees after a session. It takes place during "free time" between trusted peers in private conversation. It happens in a hallway between sessions, during a cocktail party, on the plane ride home. Off-grid dialogue is unstructured and often addresses the personal validity, usefulness and the implications of the ideas generated in an on-grid session. It's where attendees ask each other "What did you think of the session?", "Is he out of touch or did I miss something?", and "Did that make any sense to you?"

Meeting sponsors and planners often pack as much content as possible into the shortest amount of time. If more time is required to deliver content, the first areas to be cut are the networking receptions and breaks between sessions. In reality, it is during such "white spaces" that new ideas presented at the session are often successfully integrated into learning.

For instance, event planners at a travel services company provided their national sales team plenty of "white space" to reconnect at their last annual meeting. As the meeting progressed, they were encouraged to provide questions to executives via their nTAG interactive name badges, a real-time event data management (EDM) solution. By bouncing ideas and validity concerns off their peers during networking breaks, they were able to generate more relevant questions, which were then gathered by the event planners in real-time and addressed by executives at the closing session.

During another recent company sales meeting, event organizers encouraged and measured interactions between sales people and distributors using nTAG technology. Results showed salespeople who had conversations with distributors (who had expertise in selling competitive products) felt more confident about the companies' competitive position by a significant margin. The discussions after the session—the off-grid segment—actually delivered on this key objective.

By encouraging networking, planners give attendees the opportunity to develop relationships that could result in a larger community of trusted peers—people with whom they can discuss new ideas off-grid. This creates enormous benefits for attendees and often results in greater event loyalty. Event producers that combine on-grid and off-grid tactics get the best of both worlds, bringing people with common interests together and reinforcing the overall community.

In this era of ROI, organizers need to show value throughout an event. Networking sessions are at risk if they are seen merely as a "nice to have" part of the event. To demonstrate that networking provides benefits, organizers need to measure not only satisfaction but also how the number of interactions between attendees and varied groups raises learning, participation, and satisfaction. While EDM technology is known for measuring networking, collecting survey information, assessing learning levels, and gathering attendance data, the technology can also provide a look at the value of that "white space" and its impact of company objectives.

Gaining and holding the attention of attendees is not easy. However, by offering opportunities for on-grid and off-grid learning, encouraging key connections between attendees, and providing a means to truly measure ROI, event professionals can deliver a truly memorable and productive event that will also please those with an eye on the bottom line.

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