



The Leading Edge: How Social Networking Fuels Successful Conferences

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Social Networking and Conferences

The phrase “Social Networking” has generated its fair share of buzz in the web development industry with sites like MySpace and Facebook, but the concept of using the Internet as a platform for collaboration, information sharing, and networking has only begun to enter the periphery of most meeting planners’ vision. Traditional efforts to market and promote conferences seem to hold hard and fast, and it is often difficult to understand – let alone figure out how to implement – some of these new technologies to the advantage of clients, partners and attendees.

There are several social networking companies, such as [Leverage Software](#) and [IntroNetworks](#), who are directly targeting meetings and conferences as a primary delivery method for their solutions.

In the conference evaluations we develop and analyze for our clients, a common refrain is that often the greatest value an attendee perceives to obtain from a conference is what happens between sessions and after hours: the networking. Providing opportunities for like-minded individuals to swap war stories, exchange ideas and generally get to know that there are others like them out there is exceedingly valuable and will create loyal customers who keep attending your conferences. Social Networking applications like those listed above not only help to connect attendees, but serve as a platform to allow users to actively seek out others and foster these relationships to the extent the user feels comfortable.

Common features of Social Networking applications include the ability to set up personal profile pages, where users can indicate those things they are interested in, share photos and videos, post documents and generally share information about themselves. It is through these profile pages that users can find others with similar interests (often in a visually appealing scattergram representation of closest matches), or participate in blogs, chats, polls, discussions, wikis and other widgets and options. Whether or not to implement each of these tools – as well as establishing participation rules -- are configurable based on the preferences of the client.

These software tools help create an engaged conference community that helps attendees maximize their conference experience, provides additional advertising and sponsorship opportunities, and extends the footprint of each event. Furthermore, speakers can connect with their audiences to fine-tune their presentations and partners can find qualified buyers actually seeking their product. A successful implementation benefits all conference stakeholders.

One of the main objections or arguments we hear from our clients and prospects as we propose social networking solutions for events is that they find generating the rules and policies surrounding the setup a daunting task. That is why it is helpful to have a partner like Meeting Expectations to help walk through the different elements to help make informed decisions on setup and configuration. Another argument is that social networking is seen as an additional expense. In an increasingly budget-conscious industry, it is wise to watch outflows carefully. However, a well planned sponsorship strategy will allow a social networking site to be implemented while generating revenue, not subtracting from your conference bottom line. In addition, as more and more competitive meetings incorporate technologies such as social networking into their events, can you really afford not to?