



The “Other” Social Networking

Improve your meeting with more networking

With the economy lagging, the pressure is on to increase productivity – so the last meeting trend you’d expect to see taking hold is long coffee breaks. But, that is exactly what is happening at conventions and meetings – and for good reason.

Networking opportunities, always important to attendees, are an even bigger priority as business people decide whether to spend precious resources to go to a meeting. And that in turn has prompted meeting planners to rethink how they organize gatherings and the events they schedule.

“In the last 14 to 16 months, networking has become even more important as people attempt to navigate the economic downturn,” says Kemp Gallineau, Senior Vice President & Chief Sales Officer for Gaylord Hotels. “There’s a sense that they get a lot out of finding out how others in their industry, others in their same job market, are getting business done.

“And, I think there’s also a therapeutic element to networking – to understand that you’re not the only one going through what you’re going through,” Gallineau says.

Demands for more and better networking opportunities have prompted a number of changes in meeting planner requests at Gaylord Hotels, according to Rick Ricci, Vice President of Conference Management at Gaylord Texan in Grapevine, Texas.

Some trends that he and Gallineau have noted:

- Longer coffee breaks**
 “We’re seeing coffee break times expanded from the usual 15 minutes to up to 30 minutes,” says Ricci. “This gives attendees an opportunity to spend more time in conversation together, which brings value to the overall meeting.”
- Less entertainment, more conversation**
 “Whereas before a meeting might have featured a band or some sort of evening entertainment element, we’re now getting more requests for casual evening events with cocktail-style seating providing attendees an opportunity to sit down and enjoy a meal AND a conversation at the same time,” says Gallineau. Outings for golf or shopping are on the decline, notes Ricci.
- More comfortable seating clusters**
 “We’re getting more requests to create comfortable and inviting networking areas – setting up couches and seating groups in public space close to a meeting room rather than tucked into a corner,” says Ricci.
- Bigger role for social media**
 Attendees are using Twitter and other social media tools to set up appointments and better manage their networking time. (See “Getting Ahead of the Trend” article for more details.)
- Increase in team-building activities**
 “We’re seeing a lot of team-building events,” says Ricci. The response is to make parts of the exhibit hall available for team activities or use restaurant space during off hours.

“Networking is becoming even more critical, and I think planners realize that when people make decisions to go to meetings, today more than ever, they need to ensure they provide what their attendees are looking for,” says Gallineau. “Those that do make the decision to pay the money to go have a much higher expectation about the outcome, and the desired outcome for attendees often is that time with other attendees.”

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