Planning Large Conferences: Tips and Tricks

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Abstract

Large conference planning requires a high degree of attention to detail as well as collaboration and coordination between the conference chair and committee chairs. Often, it is useful to learn directly from past conference chairs and to consider those elements that have worked well in the past or could be improved on. We present the lessons learned from planning the 2017 International Master Gardener Conference. This article may help others in organizations that are considering hosting large conferences.

Keywords: conference planning, master gardener, event planning, conference committees, lessons learned

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Introduction

The biennial International Master Gardener Conference (IMGC) provides an opportunity for Extension master gardener (EMG) volunteers and coordinators to learn through seminars and tours, celebrate successes, and network with others from across the United States, Canada, and South Korea. Conference planning is coordinated by a conference chair, working in conjunction with several committee chairs. Rotating conference sites and conference chairs allows EMG coordinators to showcase local programs and to generate local program revenue.

Past IMGC chairs informally support the current chair. However, advice is largely passed on as an oral tradition. Information regarding IMGC planning is available ("Hosting an International Master Gardener Conference," 2016) but focuses on key activities and deadlines rather than practical lessons learned. Moreover, although there are articles focused on conference evaluation (e.g., Chase & Kuehn, 2010; Culp, Edwards, & Jordan, 2015; Kiernan, 1999), very little Extension information is available on organizing large conferences.

The 2017 IMGC, held in Portland, Oregon, included three keynote talks; 44 concurrent session classes; 17 half-day, full-day, and multiday tours; a gardening film festival; and 52 vendors and exhibitors. The group of conference and committee chairs, of which we were members, provided written assessments of the planning experience at the conclusion of the 2017 IMGC. Specifically, chairs provided information on four topics:

- what worked well,

- what should change,

- important statistics from the event, and

- other observations.

In this article, we highlight lessons learned with regard to the overall conference and through the registration, catering, lodging, speakers, publicity, and trade show committees.

Lessons Learned

Overall

What Worked Well

- Prior to selecting committee chairs, the conference chair ensured that each committee chair agreed with identified expectations and responsibilities.

- The conference chair developed a budget to cover costs and generate expected revenue and then added 8% to the cost of registration to cover unanticipated expenses.

Statistics

- 1,294 participants from 46 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, Canada, and South Korea attended.

- 96% were EMG volunteers and coordinators; 4% were from the general public.

- Most registrants (86%) took advantage of the early registration discount ($50).

Registration

What Worked Well

- The conference chair trained a core group of five staff to provide on-site training, support, and supervision to nearly 40 registration desk volunteers.

- The registration system did not include an option for single-day registrations, which simplified registration packet assembly and attendee check-in.

What Should Change

- The cancellation policy should be made prominent in conference materials.

- Registration desk volunteers (needed only on days 1 and 2 of the conference) should receive complimentary registration for the latter half of the conference.

- A registration system that allows registrants to log in and then see and edit their own registration information should be used.

Statistics

- 73 people cancelled before the 30-day cancellation deadline and received a full refund (minus a $50 administrative fee).

- Over 100 people asked to cancel after the 30-day cancellation deadline for a full refund had passed.

Catering

What Worked Well

- The caterers served a plated lunch, rather than a buffet, to accommodate attendees with physical limitations.

- The caterers served snacks in the trade show area to connect attendees and vendors.

What Should Change

- Snacks should be ordered at 65%–70% of the daily attendance rate to reduce waste and leftover food.

Observations

- Exhibitors, vendors, and attendees staying at conference hotels appreciated the 45-min snack breaks.

- Commuting attendees wanted shorter snack breaks so that they could return home earlier.

- Sugary snacks were not popular at snack breaks, as compared to fresh fruit, cheese, and crackers.

Lodging

What Worked Well

- The conference chair worked with a meeting procurement company to choose conference hotels. The company negotiated concessions (e.g., complimentary hotel rooms, upgrades, meeting space, airport transport) in all hotel contracts.

Observations

- Conference hotels fit three price points (budget, mid-tier, higher end). The budget hotel sold out the quickest (but was poorly reviewed), and the higher end hotel was the hardest to fill (but was well reviewed).

- Last-minute hotel room cancellations negatively affected the complimentary room blocks stipulated in hotel contracts.

Speakers

What Worked Well

- The speakers committee selected speakers to fit one of five topical "tracks" (i.e., ornamentals, edibles, design, pest management, special interest) to create a balanced educational program.

- The speakers committee checked professional references supplied by potential speakers before finalizing the educational program.

- The speakers committee chair was able to negotiate a lower than normal fee with several speakers because of these speakers' respect for the EMG program and its mission.

- Only two members of the speakers committee were authorized to directly communicate with speakers, which limited opportunities for miscommunication.

What Should Change

- Speakers should be required to check in at the speaker registration booth so that conference organizers know they have arrived.

Publicity

What Worked Well

- To reach a national audience, the publicity committee chair distributed newsletters through a mailing list cultivated by past IMGC chairs.

- To reach local EMGs, the publicity committee chair asked key EMG volunteers and coordinators to forward newsletters to their networks.

- To reach other gardeners in the region, the publicity committee chair networked with local plant societies and garden clubs.

Statistics

- Over 2 years, mailing list subscriptions increased from 2,128 to 4,052.

Trade Show

What Worked Well

- The trade show committee offered assistance to vendors at move-in. Help was not needed at move-out as vendors had fewer materials.

What Should Change

- Potential vendors should be solicited as soon as possible as many vendors plan their show attendance a year or more in advance.

- Vendors should be given 5 days after they reserve a booth to pay in full, and a booth should be released if a vendor fails to meet that deadline.

Conclusion

The 2017 IMGC was the result of much planning and coordination by a core group of EMG faculty, staff, and volunteers. Our group worked for 2 years to deliver an event that was positively reviewed by attendees (4.6 out of 5.0 stars) and made money. We hope this article will help others in organizations considering hosting large conferences.

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