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Trade Show Executive



Keeping the *Faith*

Organizers of Religious Conferences
See Glimmer of Hope for Growth

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KEEPING THE FAITH

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BY SANDI CAIN, *News Editor*

Religious conferences are not immune to economic trends, particularly when many attendees pay their own way to the events. But while the years since 2008 have been trying for this sector, there are signs of improvement, and faith-based groups have been diligently tweaking their conventions to meet the current needs and expectations of both exhibitors and attendees.

“We have weathered some tough economic years that have affected people’s ability to attend meetings at the same level as in the past,” said Dr. Harry Schmidt, executive director of the Religious Conference Management Association (RCMA).

Economic Seesaw

Last year, 5.3 million people attended religious conferences, according to RCMA’s annual member survey. That compares to about eight million attendees in 2009.

“One of the things still hurting us is the economy, even though we’re seeing some recovery,” said Simeon May, CEO of the National Association of Church Business Administration (NACBA) in Richardson, TX. He said churches tend to experience a 12 to 18-month lag time in recovery compared to the overall economy in terms of donations.

The RCMA survey revealed that some groups also have shortened their annual conventions from an average of 4.5 days to 3.5 days in an effort to reduce costs for those attendees who pay their own way. But Schmidt expressed confidence in the resilience of the sector, saying “people attend as part of an expression of their faith, and faith is an incredible attendance-driver.”

The World Religions Travel Association estimates the size of the religious travel market in the U.S. to be 225 million people. Internationally, the group

RCMA Stages First Joint-Venture with *Bahamas*

Though just 7.8% of religiously focused conferences organized by RCMA members were held outside the U.S. in 2011, that figure was up from 5.4% in 2010. It’s a sector that’s ripe for growth — particularly to destinations in close proximity to American soil. In October, 17 faith-based planner members of RCMA traveled to the Bahamas as part of a joint venture with the Bahamas Tourism Office to provide an inside look at various venues throughout Nassau and the Grand Bahamas as potential sites for future events. The group met with hotel managers, service providers and the Bahamas Minister of Tourism.

More such ventures are afoot for the future, according to Dean Jones, RCMA director of conferences and events. “There’s nothing like an in-person experience of a destination and by partnering with different destinations to explore meeting opportunities, RCMA is helping both planners and suppliers to meet their business goals,” he said.

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Religious Meetings *Snapshot*

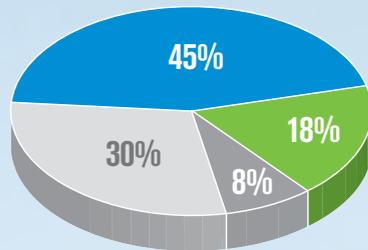
EXHIBIT SPACE & SERVICES

82%

of RCMA members used onsite catering or banquet services

62%

of RCMA members used ground transportation tours



GROSS EXHIBIT SPACE AT LARGEST RELIGIOUS CONFERENCE

None	30%
3,000-10,000 sf	45%
10,001-50,000 sf	18%
More than 50,000 sf	8%

RELIGIOUS MEETINGS

5.3

million people in 2011 attended religiously focused meetings

The Midwest is the most widely used region for meetings, accounting for 17.3% of overall member meetings. The Southeast hosted 15.1% of 2011 meetings, the Northeast 13.4% and South Central 10.8%

Internationally, Canada drew 21.3% of religiously focused meetings outside the U.S., the Caribbean drew 16% and Latin America hosted 14.7% of religious conferences.

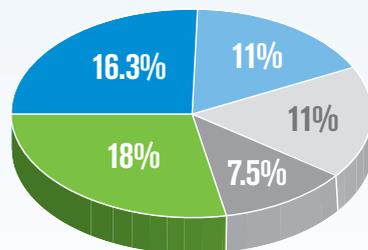
CONFERENCE HOTEL USAGE

65%

of RCMA members used fewer than 500 hotel rooms for their largest event.

17%

use between 100 and 200 hotel rooms for their largest event.



HOTEL USAGE BY RELIGIOUS CONFERENCES

Downtown hotels	18%
Conference centers	16.3%
Convention Centers	11%
Resorts	11%
College/University	7.5%

The average duration of convention stays dropped to 3.5 days, compared with 4.5 days in previous surveys.

Source: RCMA Annual Survey 2011

estimates there are another 300 million faith-based travelers.

Dave Keith, vice president of conventions for the National Religious Broadcasters in Manassas, VA said attendance dropped in 2009 and 2010, but improved by 8% in 2011 and 11% in 2012. "Early registration figures (for 2013) are nearly double the same time last year," he said. Keith said he's encouraged by a projected 7% growth in exhibitors for the 2013 show.

The recently released *American Express Meetings & Events Forecast* projects that overall meeting spending in North America next year will drop by 1%, while average group rates for hotels are expected to climb 4.2% and airfares are projected to rise by 3.3%.

While few religious conferences exceed 50,000 net square feet of exhibit space, exhibits are an integral part of these conventions.

The National Catholic Education Association's (NCEA) most recent convention drew 300 exhibiting companies using 45,000 net square feet of exhibit space. Amy Durkin, director of association events, said NCEA held a space draw at its 2011 event for its 2012 show. "It was the first time we did a pre-sales effort, and 65% signed up," she said.

The NACBA saw an uptick in exhibit space in 2012 to 18,400, even though attendance was flat. However, May said more exhibitors are expressing interest in returning this year. "They're coming back, but it's slow," May said. "It will probably be another year or two before things improve."

The lackluster growth in the meetings and convention sector also was noted in the recently released *American Express Meetings & Events Forecast*. For 2013, the forecast projected that overall meeting spending in North America next year will drop by 1%, while average group rates for hotels are expected to climb 4.2% and airfares are projected to rise by 3.3%.

Nevertheless, the religious conference market and its economic impact is still a major economic contributor to many cities. *The Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses* adds about \$6 million to the coffers in Rochester, MN and the *National Baptist Convention: USA's Congress of Christian Education* brought 25,000 people to Indianapolis last year, generating about \$24 million in direct spending, according to the convention and visitor bureau. Similarly, the *Church of God in Christ* generated about \$35 million for the

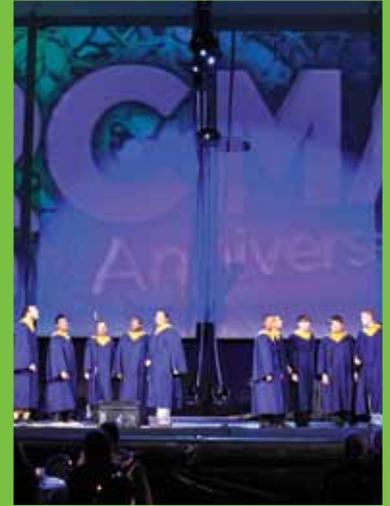
city of St. Louis during its 35,000-attendee annual convention last year.

Smaller religious meetings also have an impact as they add niche meetings and events that cater to couples, youth, women and professionals in various sectors.

Attendance Boosters

May's group is one that's hoping its 2013 location will help create an attendance bump that's been lagging since 2008. The NCBA is next scheduled to meet in Charlotte — a city that has experienced a rebirth of the downtown area since the group was last there. The conference title — "Racing Toward Excellence" — plays on the NASCAR connection with Charlotte to bring home the message.

May said new restaurants and evening activities in the downtown district as well as a central location in the Bible Belt that's easily accessible by car or



RCMA Retools

Conference

As religious conferences and meetings explore ways to maintain or build attendance in a still-sluggish economy, Indianapolis-based Religious Conference Management Association (RCMA) is leading by example with new directions for its own annual conference.

Through focus groups with members, RCMA's 2013 meeting in Minneapolis was reformatted and renamed *Emerge* to signify an evolution into new directions of relationship building and overcoming current economic times, as well as one with new and interactive experiences.

The new format provides a retooled schedule with an emphasis on options for several behind-the-scenes looks at legal and technical issues, convention center and hotel operations, and a unique local service project. In addition, there also are increased networking opportunities, extended educational formats and sessions, and new exhibitor opportunities.

In the education arena, the organizing team developed niche education tracks geared to organizers at beginner, intermediate and veteran levels, and added a supplier track. Other sessions include opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, CMP training, and a speed-dating-style session of quick tips from multiple presenters.

Exhibitors have new sponsorship opportunities at a wide price range, and in 2014, RCMA will add a hosted buyer scholarship program. "We're working hard to create an association that provides value to all of our members so that they are more productive, efficient and successful because of their relationships with fellow members and their participation in RCMA," said Dean Jones, RCMA director of conferences and events.

RCMA has 800 member organizations that plan about 14,000 meetings, conventions, retreats and other events annually that draw a combined attendance of 11 million people.

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Emerging Powerhouse. The venerable *Religious Conference Management Association Annual Meeting* has been rebranded *Emerge* after focus meetings with members. More networking time and a flexible schedule put a spark in the event amid challenging economic times.

Focus on *Facebook Helps* Attendees Connect

The National Catholic Education Association is the largest private education association convention in the U.S. and dates back to 1904. Some exhibiting companies have been on board nearly as long. So as part of the effort to connect attendees through technology and embrace the group's history, NCEA director of association events Amy Durkin posted show photos from the 1930s and 1940s on the group's Facebook page. That move ended up generating comments in an unanticipated way: long-time exhibiting company employees helped identify former company executives in the photos and posted their names on the page so others could enjoy that history on the social media portal.

Reach Amy Durkin at (571) 257-0013 or adurkin@ncea.org



Meaningful Past and Present. The National Catholic Education Association combined social media with a rich history to spotlight the annual convention. Organizers posted an archive of photos from past meetings dating back decades and drew an enthusiastic response from long-time exhibitors and attendees.

plane will hopefully bolster attendance.

San Clemente, CA-based *Christian Leadership Alliance* also hopes to boost attendance with a 2013 location in Anaheim, close to its home office. "We're tracking ahead of where we were last year already," said Scott Brown, vice president of lifelong learning.

Brown said conference attendance is edging back toward the highs of 2007 after declining for a few years. "Just like almost every group, the 2008 crash had an impact on our event," he said. The educational training conference typically draws between 1,650 and 2,000 attendees who are primarily decision-makers from Christian non-profits who can choose any of eight tracks of training sessions. "It's practical information they can apply to the organization," Brown said.

For 2013, the group has expanded on its special one-day forum format. The success of the *Engstrom Institute CEO Forum* — a peer-to-peer dialogue on leadership — has inspired the CLA to create the *CEO Dialogues Roundtable* that is limited to 25 top-level participants. In addition, there will be a one-day forum for women in leadership positions and one for NextGen leaders featuring an interactive dialogue between 50 current top-level leaders and 50 NextGen up-and-comers born after 1980.

Attendance-building efforts sometimes mean just going back to basics.



NCEA's Durkin uses the tried-and-true email option for attendance building as part of a bigger effort to establish ongoing dialogue with attendees and exhibitors. That connection paid off with feedback from previous attendees that led Durkin's team to change the way sessions were organized in tracks. "We used to list sessions by department (HR, administration); now we're listing 'audience areas' by topic," she said. The 2013 conference also will offer sessions in Spanish for the first time.

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Tech Talk

Religious conferences have joined the move toward implementing popular tech tools and social media before, during and after their events. NCEA has a dedicated social media manager who maintains the Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and other pages for the organization and is on-site at the annual convention to meet the needs of attendees. "We're an education organization (and) teachers are using iPads, iPhones and whiteboards in schools, so we need to show we understand those needs," Durkin said.

A mobile app for the 2013 convention will include the floorplan, sessions, product categories, exhibitor listings a personal agenda feature that will integrate into social media platforms. "You can't be scared by technology," Durkin said. She suggested that an



New Twist on Exhibit "Passport"

It's becoming a familiar scene: attendees scramble around an exhibit hall in search of certain exhibitors so they can get their exhibit hall "passports" stamped and be eligible for show prizes. Whether any of them actually stop and talk to the exhibitor remains a point of contention with the trendy program.

The National Catholic Education Association tried to temper that complaint with a twist of its own when they added the prize card to the mix last year. They did require attendees to obtain roughly two-thirds of the available stamps to be eligible for prizes. But they also addressed the "stamp and go" mentality in order to attract sponsors by encouraging sponsors to qualify attendees for the stamp by engaging them in conversation, asking them to hear a short presentation or otherwise pay attention to the exhibitor and the product before they could get the stamp.

While there's no hard data to prove how well that worked, director of association events Amy Durkin said they plan to repeat the program at the next convention and that sponsorships were nearly sold out.

Reach Amy Durkin at (571) 257-0013 or adurkin@ncea.org

Christian Booksellers **Aim to Create Year-Round Interest**

The Christian Booksellers Association plans to experiment with special initiatives that they hope will extend the post-show reach of 2013 to pre-show interest for 2014.

“We are creating a destination merchandising exhibit at the show that will be a pivot for pre-show engagement via social media, on-site interaction, and post-show engagement with implementation guides, social media follow-up and possibly post-show training and dialogue,” said Curtis Risky, executive director of the Colorado Springs-based group.

Risky said the group typically has engaged its audience through surveys, online workshop sessions and general news coverage. Now they hope to get attendees to take part in year-round activities. The plan is to encourage attendees to practice merchandising techniques learned at the destination exhibit in their stores at home, then send pictures of what they did to the organization for review, comment and sharing within the association community. The effort will serve as the foundation for revisiting and recognizing merchandising performance during the 2014 show, thus creating a show-to-show cycle of activity.

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organization that isn't proficient tech-wise would be wise to change its ways. “Find someone who can develop social media, mobile apps and other offerings, because the attendees want it,” she said.

The Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) has taken a more cautious approach, using social media in marketing first and learning from industry experts before jumping into the fray. “Our social media strategies are evolving as we become familiar with how our customers use the technology and how we can have more meaningful interaction through the medium,” said Curtis Risky, executive director of CBA.

Not surprisingly, the National Christian Broadcasters have jumped in headfirst. Next March, one general session will be anchored by representatives from Facebook, Twitter and Google who will share tips and case studies that illustrate how best to use each social media platform. “As a media-centric convention, we have the added responsibility of helping our members navigate and implement social media within their own work,” said vice president of conventions Dave Keith.

Keith also said the mobile app they tried in 2011 has been abandoned in favor of a simpler mobile site. “The mobile site can accomplish all we need without the added cost or hurdles inherent in creating an app,” he said. “We're not convinced that providing an app is the best investment based upon the feedback of our attendees,” he added. Instead, the group signed on with Map Your Show, a service he called “simple, clean and functional.”

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