

EXAMINING THE FUTURE OF
MEDICAL
SHOWS

A Special Report by
Trade Show Executive

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Examining the Health of Medical Conventions

BY RENEE DIULIO, SENIOR EDITOR

Medical trade shows and annual meetings performed as well as could be expected in enduring the recent recessionary headwinds. But does that mean these events will begin jogging forward now that the economic clouds have parted?

Trade Show Executive explored the state of medical meetings and found a healthy dose of cautious optimism as well as caveats about continuing tight exhibitor budgets that will likely keep a

lid on exhibit-space growth, and an ever-increasing insistence on measurements to determine exhibitor ROI.

Meeting managers are taking proactive steps to improve educational offerings, which remain the major draw for attendees. Some are incorporating lectures and other presentations in areas right on the show floor.

In this special insert, *Trade Show Executive* examines some of the major trends in medical events.

continued on page M-4



All the Exhibit Floor is a Stage

As the health of the economy plummeted with the Great Recession in the late 2000s, healthcare exhibitions held their own. People always get sick, and they always need care, was the reasoning. But as the economy continued to falter and healthcare continued to be scrutinized by both the government and the public, events serving the medical industry began to morph.

Conferences are still key. Many medical professionals require continuing education to continue working (legally), and healthcare conventions provide a major avenue for many professionals to complete these requirements. This focus on education is both a boon and a burden: an excellent conference program will draw target attendees to the show, but it may also keep them off the show floor.

“There’s no question that at medical shows, attendees spend less time on the show floor than at other shows,” says Skip Cox, CEO and president of Exhibit Surveys, Inc. “The average attendee spends 8.1 hours at a trade show in general but only 6.5 hours at a medical show.” However, Cox pointed out that the average time invested at healthcare shows has remained fairly constant over the years, fluctuating by fewer hours than many other types of events.

It is a constant challenge for the medical show organizer and exhibitor to entice conference attendees to the show floor. Many choose to do so with more education. “We look at our exhibit floor not just as the marketplace, but also as an extension of the educational program,” says Randy Bauler, corporate relations and exhibits director for the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN).

With the passage of the Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in March 2010, education on the show floor has become more important and more complex. (Note: *Technically, the Physician Payments Sunshine Act did not pass, but the provisions of that proposed bill were included in the overall PPACA. The sections of the law that were part of the original Physician Payments Sunshine Act are informally called the “Sunshine provisions” of the overall Federal healthcare reform law.*)

Without tangible ways to draw attendees into booths (e.g. no more tchotchkes), exhibitors have turned to education. However, this education also falls under regulatory purview and must meet certain requirements even though CEUs (continuing education units) are typically no longer awarded for exhibit booth education.



Bauler



Dillehay

The result has been an increase in product theaters on the show floor, which offer education for attendees and marketing exposure for exhibitors, as well as other educational opportunities. Sometimes, short educational presentations are held in an exhibitor’s booth, but most product theaters in medical shows are held in separate booths or modular structures. The education may involve product demonstrations or traditional slide presentations. At the AACN, the process has evolved further, with a new type of CEU that attendees are able to use professionally. (Read about CERPS, below, under the section “Encore.”)

Costs and Benefits of Product Theaters

The Dillehay Management Group organizes product theaters for the Association of Family Practice Physician Assistants and the

Georgia Association of Physician Assistants. Exhibitors are charged per head (typically \$50) to present a 45-minute session, which may include a meal for the attendee, although the Sunshine provisions limit what can be given by and credited to the sponsoring company.

The Sunshine provisions do allow the associations, however, to help cover meal costs. "It's a big win for exhibitors who can spend \$15,000 and have the undivided attention of 300 potential customers for 45 minutes. And the attendees love the education," says Chuck Dillehay, president of the Dillehay Management Group.

At AACN, where product theaters are held within exhibit booths on the show floor as part of a program called ExpoEd, exhibitors are charged per topic: \$600 for the first subject, \$400 for each additional topic. Each presentation must be submitted to and approved by conference management. "Some exhibitors submit one or two topics; others submit seven or eight," Bauler reveals.

The cost for the exhibitor to get topics approved is nominal, but the company usually needs more space to accommodate the audience. "Typically, this involves an in-booth theater with 30 to 50 seats. "You could look at it as an additional cost to the exhibitor, but it also drives traffic," Bauler says.

Rules and Regulations

Product theaters have helped to offset contractions due to the down economy and tightened budgets. "Because companies are less able to use the traditional attention-getting techniques, they may feel they are seeing less traffic, but doctors are coming to the show floor. So it's really about the level of meaningful engagement you can establish with them, and the theaters are one way to engage an audience without violating the compliance issues," Cox says.

A survey of members of the Healthcare Convention and Exhibitors Association (HCEA) conducted by Exhibit Surveys, Inc. in December 2010 found that 37% of respondents expect to decrease their convention marketing budgets in 2011 while 18% expect to increase this expense, according to Jennifer Palcher-Silliman, director of content



Blockbusters. The AANP held its first product theaters seven years ago, starting with two and growing to nearly 100% of industry-supported events, according to Zo DeMarchi, director of association services.

and education for HCEA.

Although the survey did not cover the influence of product theaters, anecdotal evidence suggests exhibitors may be spending more money on education efforts on the show floor. "We had our first product theaters in 2004 or 2005 and started with two. Then it was six. And now, it's almost 100% of industry-supported events," says Zo DeMarchi, director of association services for the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP).

The presentations generally cover non-CEU product education/marketing types of topics with information about the state of the disease and effects of product use. "They are always very appreciated and well attended by conference attendees," DeMarchi says.

Feature Performers

Education, in general, is a big draw, and AACN has developed another teaching moment on the show floor with educational feature stages devoted to specific topics, such as blood banks, healthcare purchasing and the supply chain, and transport nursing. The stage design varies according to the subject.

For instance, the Blood Bank Stage, organized in conjunction with the American Association of Blood Banks (AABB), is a 20' by 30' area with a more traditional booth display, while the Transport Nursing Stage will

occupy 40' by 80' on this year's show floor and showcase actual emergency transport vehicles. AACN works with the Air and Surface Transport Nurses Association (ASTNA), which secures the speakers, ambulances and helicopters showcased on the stage.

Encore

The feature stages get attention, drawing attendees to the show floor and keeping them there, but AACN has developed another innovative method of extending attendee exhibit time: CERPs. CERPs are Continuing Education Recognition Points, which are awarded for attendance at sessions, such as those delivered in the product theaters or with unrestricted corporate funds, that are no longer eligible for CEUs due to tighter restrictions.

CERP was designed for use by professionals seeking to renew their certifications with the organization. One CERP is equal to 60 minutes of continuing education. First introduced around 2008, the credits are starting to be accepted by other institutions, including state nursing boards. "It depends on the presentation and content and is determined on a case-by-case basis, but some states are accepting CERPs for license renewal," Bauler states. This increases the value of the show floor for attendees and helps to draw them to it like any good stage.



Budgets Under Pressure

Most medical shows should not expect an upswing toward boom times this year. “Healthcare convention marketing is still fundamentally sound, but budgetary challenges are the new normal,” says Jennifer Palcher-Silliman, director of content and education for the Healthcare Convention and Exhibitors Association (HCEA).

According to a survey of the organization’s members conducted by Exhibit Surveys, Inc. in December 2010, more than one-third — 37% — of respondents expect to decrease their convention marketing budgets in 2011, while only 18% expected an increase. Both groups expect to change their budgets by similar proportions. For the healthcare exhibitors who will increase their exhibit budgets in 2011, the increase will be by an average of 15%; for those who expect declining budgets, the average decrease will be 18%.

These additional costs or savings will be distributed in different ways.

- Roughly two-fifths of members plan to decrease the size of their exhibits by an average of 17%;
- About a third of convention marketing members plan to decrease certain sponsorships and promotions;
- Almost a third of members plan to participate in fewer conventions in 2011, while 29% plan an increase; and
- Two-fifths of members plan to increase their participation in regional and local events.

Measuring the Metrics

So the news is mixed, which means show organizers should take stock of their strategies to increase both registration and exhibiting companies and implement appealing changes. “Medical association convention managers should work closely with their exhibitors and

convention marketers to find solutions to measuring results and proving the value of healthcare convention marketing,” Palcher-Silliman says.

The call for metrics mirrors a call for better show measures in general. “Exhibitors are asking for more information from show organizers,” says Skip Cox, chief executive officer and president of Exhibit Surveys, Inc. Organizers have an obligation to provide exhibitors with the data they need to determine their potential for success at any given event. This includes attendance numbers and demographic information.

Because medical shows are often vertical, demographics may be easier to discern. “You go to a cardiology show, and it’s mostly cardiologists. You go to a urology show, and it’s mostly urologists,” Cox says, but he notes, the level of professional can differ so it is still important to define the data for exhibitors.

Determining whether an actual return on the investment or objectives has been achieved is the responsibility of the exhibitor, since exhibitor goals vary widely. The pharmaceutical company may want to focus on education and impacting prescribing habits, whereas a medical device company is likely to be more focused on influencing purchasing intent and accelerating the sales process.

However, even though it is the exhibiting company’s responsibility to determine its success or failure, it requires certain data and/or permissions from the organizer. Exhibitors may need to survey attendees to accurately judge their performance. “It becomes a touchy situation in terms of privacy issues. Healthcare convention attendees are generally members of the association, and they understandably don’t like to share their names and addresses,” Cox says.

But it’s important for show organizers to

help exhibitors obtain the information they need so these metrics can be measured and used subsequently to boost show performance and participation. “Results measurement will become increasingly important to help exhibitors make better investment decisions and justify their convention marketing programs,” Palcher-Silliman says.

Beating the Odds

Although we are past the days where companies feel they have to exhibit at a show so that they are not conspicuous by their absence, premier shows are still in a stronger position to weather the economic upswings and downturns. The American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) is the largest gathering for its growing segment of healthcare professionals, according to Zo DeMarchi, AANP’s director of association services, with more than 5,000 attendees expected at this year’s event.

Registration figures for the June 2011 show have already exceeded last year’s final numbers, and space sales are also strong. “At our first round of space assignments a few weeks ago, we had exactly the same number of booths but more square footage than last year,” DeMarchi says.

The news is encouraging, and though DeMarchi cautions against claiming success too early, she acknowledges two major factors that could lead to a banner year: an extensive education program covering the latest topic in every specialty area and its location. This year, the event will be held in Las Vegas, a popular destination for any industry.

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There's an APP for That

The virtual world has found its way into reality with the huge prevalence of electronic devices that keep everyone connected. While the past few years have seen a lot of attention focused on social media, software programs developed for use on handheld devices have managed to quietly take over the digital domain. And while some show organizers are still navigating LinkedIn, Facebook and newer forums, other show organizers have launched their own apps to keep them current and in touch.

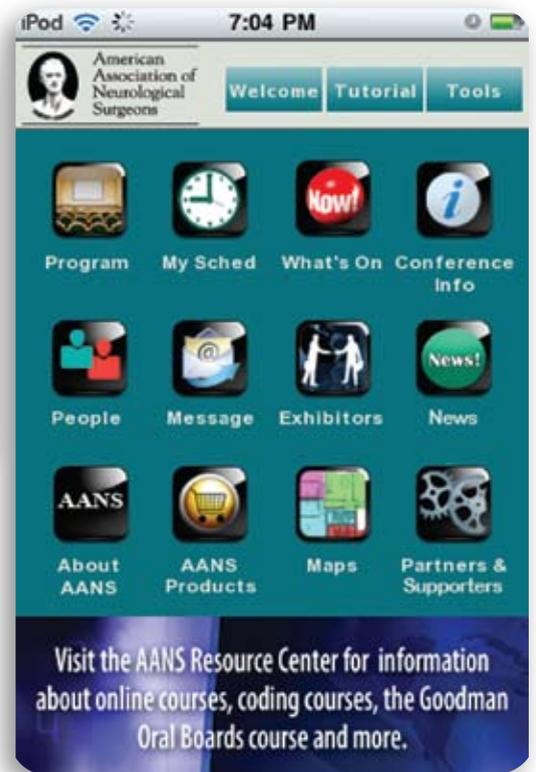
The American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) debuted an iPod app last year that was not only a big hit with participants, but also garnered the organization a significant amount of press coverage, including a *Trade Show*



It's Not Brain Surgery. Attendees navigate the *American Association of Neurological Surgeons Annual Scientific Meeting* with the help of a custom iPod app. Apps are becoming a standard feature at medical conferences.

Executive 2010 Innovation Award. "Last year, we were going into it as novices, and we learned a lot based on member surveys," says Betsy van Die, AANS director of communications.

As a result, the association has implemented some changes
continued on page M-8



BYOi. With a year of experience behind it, AANS made a few changes to its successful iTunes trade show app, including asking attendees to bring their own Apple device (e.g., iPod) with the application already downloaded.

continued from page M-7



van Die

to improve the program, both from the participant and organizer perspectives. Its first move was to require participants to bring their own devices.

Last year, everyone was starting at the same point, and AANS gave its professional attendees iPod Touch devices with the app already downloaded. This year, it expects last year's attendees to bring those devices, while new attendees can provide their own with the application already downloaded from the iTunes store.

"We've had to communicate that very clearly and have done so with our series of newsletters, emails, our tagline and branding," van Die says. While AANS is preparing a backup plan for unprepared attendees (the biggest unknown, van Die acknowledges), it hopes to avoid the need for its 3,000 professional attendees to download the app onsite (the show draws about 7,000 visitors in total).

Were this to happen, connectivity problems would result, as the downloads require more bandwidth. Similarly, the association did away with audience response, which worked too slowly last year to be truly effective. Instead, AANS added a rating system for people to complete through the devices.

At the same time, it has opened the network to outside connectivity. Last year,

the system was closed, and participants could only email each other or visit certain websites. This year, they will be able to browse any URL.

Additionally, personal messages have been separated from more general announcements and releases. "If someone wanted to contact someone about going to a 2:00 p.m. scientific session, the message was mixed in with marketing eblasts," says van Die, noting this caused some frustration. This year, one icon represents person-to-person messages, while another pulls up news items.

There Should Be an App for That

The efficiency is appreciated by attendees who have all of the event information in one portable place and by the show organizer who has cut down on printing costs, saved a little space (poster presentations are now digital rather than physical) and found making last-minute changes much easier to communicate. "If we change a presentation time, it updates participants' schedules instantly. Before, with paper, if there were changes, we had to scramble to print and place signage," van Die says.

The biggest challenge has been managing the amount of work involved. AANS begins working with the developer months in advance. Most of the exchange is data driven, but the information must be fed to the developer.

To enhance the application's features, AANS decided to stick with one device platform — Apples. The application can be downloaded onto any iPod, iPhone or iPad. "If you cross-platform for every type of smartphone, the program must be

diluted," van Die says.

However, healthcare professionals are like the rest of the population: they have different opinions and different devices. For this reason, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) is developing apps for its conference and year-round education programs that will work across all platforms — "platform agnostic, if you will," says Randy Bauler, CEM, AACN's corporate relations and exhibits director.

As AANS could have warned them, however, the effort is very time-consuming and AACN plans to launch only a web-based app in time for the 2011 edition, which takes place in Chicago April 30 to May 5. van Die notes that AANS received a lot of requests from other show organizers and that she participated in presentations about the app to groups. "But when they discovered how much was involved, their enthusiasm died down, and not too many people decided to pursue it," van Die says. Someone should invent an app for making apps.

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