



PROGRAMMING

Do's and Don'ts of Creating Effective Educational Programming for an International Audience

BY DAWN REISS

Finding the right mix of speakers and educational programming can be challenging for a global event. In the past three years, Cellie Morales, an education and learning services manager at SmithBucklin (a Chicago-based association management and services company), has hosted 10 conferences or events per year—on average, three among those outside the United States.

"It's easy to silo educational programming from the experience," Morales says. "Instead, [planners should] look at it from a holistic point of view." Here are her tips for creating educational programs for an international audience.

DO DECIDE THE PROGRAMMING DIVIDE.

First, consider your audience and whether programming sessions need to be broken out into geographic regions. Morales starts by researching online and working with subject matter experts in a particular group's industry or field to see if there is a unified viewpoint or not.

"What makes international audiences more challenging is you are dealing with a greater variety of people, and though the business challenges they face may be similar, the way they overcome those may be different," Morales says. That's because countries vary in their cultural preferences, laws and regulations. For example, an educational session on how to market a product or service might look completely different in terms of tactics and techniques for an emerging market versus a more established one.

DO FIND RELATABLE TOPICS.

Think about where members are coming from, suggests Morales. For example, during a vacation rental natural disaster conference, Morales had concurrent tracks for different regions of the world—Europe, Asia-Pacific, East and West Coasts of the United States—because how a region handles a natural disaster will be different based on its geography and legal system.

DON'T FOCUS ONLY ON BILINGUAL PRESENTERS.

Instead, hone in first on finding dynamic speakers who can give advice on relevant topics, Morales says.

DO BE STRATEGIC WITH TRANSLATION, HOWEVER.

It takes a lot of time and money to translate a speaker. Morales says some industries, such as technology, scientific or medical fields, typically use English as their primary language and require almost everyone in that industry to speak it. In other industries, and particularly those in emerging markets, translation may be necessary to bring new attendees to an event. For example, Morales helped plan a conference in the print industry that translated most of the content into Spanish because the Latin American sector of the industry only spoke Spanish and worked primarily with Spanish-speaking individuals. The cost was worth it, however: "As they make up a large sector of that industry, we wanted them at the conference," Morales says.

DON'T ASSUME THE SAME LEVEL OF TRANSLATION WORKS FOR EVERYONE.

For a budget of a couple thousand dollars, Morales says event planners can have content delivered in English and then have attendees listen to a translation in a separate room broadcast over a speaker. The most expensive type of translation is simultaneous translation, where attendees wear headphones linked to a booth in back. This setup can typically cost \$10,000 to \$20,000.

Extra-budget-conscious event planners may consider creating a glossary of 50 business terms known within the industry that aren't going to translate well, Morales says. For example, during a tech conference in Hungary, Morales says even though her audience was filled with C-suite executives who had advanced industry knowledge and spoke English "well enough," she says her team noticed there were industry terms that needed to be translated. "For each session, we had the speaker identify key words that were relevant to their content, and had those translated into Spanish, French and Italian," she says.

DO FIND A LOCAL SPEAKER FOR THE OPENING.

When meeting abroad, the opening keynote doesn't always have to be so specific to your

conference, Morales says. Instead, consider a speaker who can give attendees a broader exposure to the city they are visiting. “Have someone explain that specific culture,” she says. “It doesn’t have to be a full hour, but it can get people excited about the destination.” In India, Morales booked a local speaker to share the history of Bollywood and brought in a chef to teach attendees how to cook Indian food.

DO DECIDE THE APPROPRIATE SESSION FORMAT.

Culturally, this can make a big difference, Morales says. Conference attendees from the Asia-Pacific region are more comfortable with listening to a presentation and asking questions afterward instead of having interactive sessions, she says. North Americans tend to prefer action-oriented items with specific steps to improve their business, while Europeans often prefer to understand the methodology process behind your conclusions before they receive recommendations.

DON'T FORGET TO CONSIDER HOW A LOCAL CULTURE FUNCTIONS.

For example, when hosting a European conference, Morales never starts a session before 9 a.m. “I get yelled at for having it that early,” she says, because attendees often don’t go to dinner before 9 p.m. In India, instead of scheduling 15 minutes between sessions, she schedules 30 or even 45 minutes for an extended tea-and-biscuits break in the afternoon. “Be flexible,” she advises, “and know it’s not going to be the same every year.”

DO BUILD A LOCAL TEAM TO CREATE REPRESENTATIVE PANELS.

Create a small task force to get feedback before booking specific topics and panel types. Morales suggests finding volunteers from each region to find preferred learning methods, speakers and topics. “When you’re at an international event, you have speakers from all over the world,” she says. “If you plan to have a panel discuss a topic, make sure you have representatives from all regions.”

DON'T SKIP RESEARCHING LOCAL HOLIDAYS AND GAUGING COMMUNICATION CYCLES.

You can create the most robust education programs, but if the conference falls during a holiday, it can thwart even the best-laid plans. Morales’ advice: Never plan a conference in August in Europe when most Europeans are on holiday. “You literally won’t hear from people,” she says. Avoid France’s Bastille Day, July 14, and remember France now forbids its employees to send an email after 5 p.m., Morales advises. Keep in mind everything is closed on Fridays in Israel and they work on Sundays, she says. She suggests using officeholidays.com as a resource to find more holidays in your host city.