
Six pro tips for organizing an amazing conference

by **Jeff Toister**
Service Culture Keynote Speaker



Introduction

This guide contains six high-impact tips from experienced conference organizers that can help make your next event a memorable one.

First, let's meet the event organizers:

Patty Caron
Conference and Event Professional

Tom DeWitt, Ph.D.
Director, CXM@MSU, Academic Director, MS-CXM
Broad College of Business, Michigan State University

Vicki Herrell
Executive Director
Quality Assurance & Training Connection (QATC)

Dan Scott
IT Nation Community Director
ConnectWise

Eric Smith
Director of Sales & Marketing
Alliant Systems

Joy Sobhani
Show Director, Bar & Restaurant Group
Questex

Kipp Stumpf
IT Nation Program Manager
ConnectWise

#1 Use keynotes as anchors

Each type of conference session plays a different role. Use keynote sessions to market the conference and create some buzz at the event. Breakout sessions allow participants to go deeper into topics.

Start by booking compelling keynote sessions.

Tom DeWitt: "Keynotes help to attract an audience to the conference, while also drawing them back to the main venue from breakout sessions."

Next, build your agenda around your keynotes.

Patty Caron: "Keynotes should be used throughout the conference as a way to bring everyone together in one room and help frame the event and the content. Typically, having at least one keynote per day along with blocks of breakout sessions is a good a balance for the audience."

The size of the audience plays a big role.

Joy Sobhani: "If it's a smallish event, a program made up of primarily general sessions can work well. If it's a large group, some breakouts add a smaller group opportunity for more interactivity."

Be sure to add in variety.

Dan Scott: "Never underestimate the power of a panel. Panels give you different voices, opinions and thoughts and they have this wonderful habit of going off on a brilliant tangent that delivers value you never expected."

#2 Add in lots of breaks

Breaks help people stay focused throughout the event. They get people moving and provide a chance to get some refreshments and use the restroom.

Kipp Stumpf: "We try to have a break about every 90 minutes as that is when attention spans start to fade."

Dan Scott: "Put a break between each topic session, get people up and moving, then back in the room ready to take on the next session of content. Your audience will thank you and they'll take in a lot more of your content than they would if you overload them."

Some attendees might ask for longer breaks, but organizers caution against doing this.

Tom DeWitt: "If they have too much time, they'll get distracted and won't move on to the next session."

Patty Caron: "It's not unusual for attendees to ask for longer breaks to network, but networking opportunities can take place during other activities: breakfast, lunch, expo hall, and receptions."

Two caveats on break time.

First, consider the size of your venue. Larger venues might require longer breaks if it takes participants a long time to walk from session to session.

Second, help breakout speakers set-up and break down. A 15-minute break does not leave much time for one speaker to pack up their belongings and the next speaker to get set up, especially if participants want to chat.

#3 Make the last day stellar

Great content is the best way to keep your participants from leaving early on the last day of a multi-day event.

Put something stellar on the final day to give participants a reason to stick around.

Vicki Herrell: "I just try to put sessions on the last day that I know are going to be popular."

Avoid front-loading your best content.

Joy Sobhani: "You want to start strong, so the tendency is to put your best sessions on day one. This is a mistake—if you want to keep people engaged you need to ensure that you put some of your best content on day two."

Save some great content for the end of the day.

Tom DeWitt: "Give them something compelling to attend at the end of the day and make the sessions highly interactive and applied."

It's okay to balance participant needs.

Kipp Stumpf: "We try to end a bit early so that people aren't stressing about travel. We also keep some key breakouts towards the end of the day so that they stay."

Some people will always leave early, but this can help you cut costs.

Eric Smith: "I always save some money for the company by decreasing the food and beverage guarantee by about 10-15% on the last day. If more people show up, you can always pay for them, but you can't adjust down with most hotel properties after the fact."

#4 Throw a great party

An evening party, outing, or special event is a great way to create a memorable experience for participants. It's also an important opportunity for people to build relationships.

The party should be fun.

Patti Caron: "Always have a theme. Your marketing people will love having a creative way to promote the event!"

Kipp Stumpf: "Space where people can get up and network and not be tied down to a seat works well."

Keep things simple so participants can easily attend.

Vicki Herrell: "Try to have it close to the event venue so people can walk back if they don't want to stay the whole time. If they aren't excited about a big party, I suggest they at least come and have dinner."

Eric Smith: "If it's a social activity, like a happy hour, don't even make them sign up. If the activity is such that an RSVP is necessary, make the sign-up process as simple as possible. Focus on activities that don't require travel from the event site. If it does, make sure you provide transportation."

Make it inclusive.

Patty Caron: "Include everyone attending the conference. Some hosts like to limit it to select audience members (ie..certain titles or companies), but many companies send groups and they all want to be included as do speakers, exhibitors and sponsors."

#5 Plan for the morning after

It takes smart planning and compelling content to get people to show up the next morning after a great evening event. For many participants, the party is a time to really let loose, and it can be tempting to sleep in the next day.

Start by giving people a reason to get out of bed.

Patty Caron: "Having your most popular keynote take place that morning will entice the audience to show up."

Tom DeWitt: "I had attendees who closed bars and didn't get to bed until 2:30 a.m. who still managed to show up for the opening of the second day, as we had a great keynote session at 8:45 a.m."

Of course, you can hedge by starting a little later.

Kipp Stumpf: "We start the next day keynote 60-90 minutes later than the previous day and make sure breakfast is available and convenient."

It also helps to make sure the previous night doesn't go too late.

Eric Smith: "Try and have any formal hosted event end by 8:30 or 9:00 PM. Make sure any late-night events are informal and not sponsored by the event."

#6 Keep your sponsors happy

Give sponsors and exhibitors opportunities to connect with participants without creating too much sales pressure at the event.

Allow sponsors to attend alongside other participants.

Vicki Herrell: "Sponsor attendees are treated like regular attendees and can go to sessions and attend evening events and eat with the attendees. This gives the sponsors the opportunity to meet attendees on a different level than just through the booth."

Give sponsors some dedicated time on the agenda, but not too much.

Patty Caron: "The onsite team does not want to be standing all day with sparse crowds. They'd much rather have shortened, dedicated expo hall time. This way they get quality interactions on the floor, but still have time to network in the conference."

Kipp Stumpf: "We have a dedicated room called a solutions pavilion and have dedicated time where no other sessions are going on. Putting lunch in the same room or a happy hour also works out well."

Make it easy for participants to make those connections with exhibitors.

Joy Sobhani: "It's also helpful to provide information to help attendees navigate the floor and more easily find the vendors they're most interested in."

Finally, create informal spaces for sponsors and participants to interact.

Eric Smith: "During our last event, we created a sponsored lounge for attendees where they could relax, have a snack, and use free wi-fi. This provided a sponsorship opportunity and kept the attendees nearby."

About Jeff

Jeff Toister is your service culture guide.

His first customer interaction ended in failure. Vowing to learn from that experience, he became obsessed with customer service.

Today, Jeff is a keynote speaker who has written four customer service books, including [The Service Culture Handbook](#). Over 1,000,000 people have taken one of his training courses on [LinkedIn Learning](#).

Let's work together to make your next event a great one!

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