

3 Strategies to Emotionally Connect Attendees to Your Event

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When MeetingsNet asked the IMEX Group CEO Carina Bauer about the most important trends she's seeing played out on the world stage—and at her organization's meetings industry shows, IMEX America and IMEX in Frankfurt—the conversation kept circling back to finding ways to personalize the experience for every attendee.

When your show draws more than 3,200 attendees from 60 countries, as IMEX America did this year in Las Vegas, the task of customizing the experience for each seems overwhelming. But Bauer says that, while it is challenging, it can be done.



Here are some of the strategies the IMEX Group used to connect attendees with each other, with exhibitors, and with the show.

1. It's all about giving people choices.

Some people want to party, others want to meditate. Some are all about networking, for others education reigns supreme. There's no one way to accommodate all those different agendas, so Bauer suggests giving people as many options as is feasible to get what they want from the event.

At IMEX America, the show organizers worked with other meeting industry organizations, exhibitors, and sponsors to meet those needs. Attendees who were there to learn had the Meeting Professionals International-organized Smart Monday, a full day of educational sessions, plus daily keynotes, campfires, short sessions, and deep dives into meeting-related hot topics. Attendees who wanted to party had after-hour options sponsored by industry partners and suppliers, from SITE Nite North America and Association Evening on Monday, to the Ovation and [DMC](#) Network IMEX Talent Search and after party. TweetUps and a viewing reception for the presidential debate offered networking opportunities for political junkies and [social media](#) followers. The Meeting Professionals International Foundation Rendezvous fundraiser provided the ultimate party at Drai's Nightclub.



For those who were more into health and fitness than cocktails and dancing (or who wanted an antidote to the same), there were Morning Yoga and Yogurt sessions sponsored by Hilton's Meet with a Purpose, and many "meditative moments" breaks in the Be Well Lounge, also sponsored by Hilton. The IMEXrun, a 5k fun run held on Wednesday morning, was so popular there were 800 registrants—more than they could officially accommodate. CEIR, the Center for Exhibition Industry Research, held its Golf Classic during the pre-show Smart Monday for those who'd rather tee off on the golf course than learn on the educational concourse.

Other niched opportunities included the SITE Young Leaders Conference, a two-day program for budding incentive planners; a Certified Incentive Specialist certification program; a day-long IAEE CEM Learning Program; and the Executive Meeting Forum, an invitation-only event-within-an-event for senior corporate planners. In addition there was a half-day Association Focus on Smart Monday, a two-stream educational program presented by ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership and ICCA.

Bauer says the key is to ensure that the range of activities is broad enough to provide something for everyone, but each experience fits with the core reason people attend.

2. Involve your exhibitors and sponsors.

IMEX America was not shy about co-locating a plethora of activities with a wide range of meeting industry associations, sponsors, and exhibitors.

"Exhibitors are getting more strategic about how they present their brands at our shows," said Bauer. One example was the Be Well Lounge. "Hilton didn't just put a logo on it," she says. "They were a part of the experience."

Another creative idea to connect exhibitors and attendees was the PAWS for a Break station, where puppies from an animal therapy training organization were available for snuggling. The popular spot was powered by MPI and sponsored by Visit Norfolk.



Exhibitors went all out on the show floor to provide experiences along with their pitches. Among the many special activities at booths were a continental breakfast that included the chance to get a professional headshot; numerous expert-led in-booth educational sessions; a giant computer gaming competition; and even a live Sumo demonstration.

When exhibitors and sponsors showcase what they do in a nonpromotional way it resonates with attendees. Those who can demonstrate how they can make attendees' lives easier and more productive will make a much more lasting impact than those who just collect business cards as attendees stroll by.

3. Make it easy for attendees to meet their "tribes."

While a lot of activities focus on connecting buyers and sellers, it's important to help buyers find peers who they can connect with and learn from, and potentially form relationships that last after the booths are packed up and shipped home, says Bauer.

This year, IMEX enlisted networking specialists Zenvoy to provide a new service that used intelligent data profiling to facilitate face-to-face introductions between pre-registered buyers. The idea was to help them find each other at after-hours social events, during breaks, and online before, during, and after the show.

Bauer says, "We see this new initiative as a valuable way to make it easier for people to meet others with whom they have the most in common. In a show that's as large and busy as IMEX America we're clear that it's our duty—and also our pleasure—to bring people closer together for long-term mutual gain."

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