

Social Networks for Conferences: An Opportunity to Engage Attendees, Grow Attendance

*An survey analysis from over 325 associations about
their use of social media for conferences*

By Chris Uschan, Omnipress Marketing Leader



Imagine a social network built around a conference. A site that could be independent from or integrated with an association's other social media efforts. The system could reach potential and future attendees to generate buzz about the event. It could allow participants to connect with others who have similar interests before, during and after the event. A social network for a conference could host all the conference handouts and create a permanent archive of the education the event creates. As the social network grows, it will help increase attendance and create lasting value for the organization and its members.

In a survey of association executives and consultants, Omnipress set out to discover how associations view social media networks for their events. The survey asked questions about present social network use, benefits of creating a social network for a conference and use of technology at conferences.

Key Results:

- ▶ 80 percent of the respondents use some type of free social network for their organization, such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter
- ▶ 35 percent have a custom-built social network system
- ▶ 19 percent have a social network site for their conferences
- ▶ 60 percent of respondents offer wireless internet access at their largest events
- ▶ 22 percent reported that more than half of their attendees bring laptops to events; 51 percent said more than half bring internet-enabled smart phones
- ▶ The top three benefits from a conference-based social network were:
 - To create pre-event interest and enthusiasm
 - To facilitate interaction among conference participants
 - To increase attendance

**80 percent of the respondents use some type of
free social network for their organization**

Respondent Profile

Invitations to the survey were distributed via email to a variety of Omnipress contacts. In addition, the link was posted on LinkedIn and on the Omnipress Blog, resulting in 331 total responses.

More than half of the respondents were from professional associations or societies, followed by 14 percent from trade associations. Of the professional associations, 28 percent were in the Health/Medical field; 18 percent were Trade/Business focused; and 8 percent were Scientific/Engineering and Education associations.

Respondent Demographics

Type of Organization	% of Respondents
Professional Association or Society	56.5
Trade Association	14.2
Association Management Company	7.3
Independent Meeting Planner	4.5
Government	.9
Corporate Organization	5.4
Other	11.2

Respondent Primary Department	% of Respondents
General Leadership	25.1
Education/Certification	12.4
Membership	6.6
Meetings/Conferences	23.0
Publications	3.0
Marketing/Communication	17.2
Other	12.7

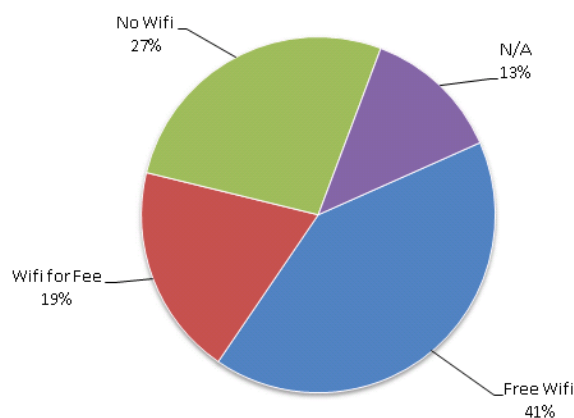
Size of Largest Event	% of Respondents
No Meetings	4.2
Under 100 Attendees	4.2
100-500 Attendees	33.5
500-1,500 Attendees	24.8
1,500-3,000 Attendees	13.0
3000+ Attendees	20.2

Membership Size	% of Respondents
Not a Member Organization	17.8
Under 1,000	22.4
1,000-5,000	28.7
5,000-10,000	7.6
10,000-50,000	15.7
50,000+	7.9

Technology at Events

According to the survey, attendees are bringing technology with them to events to keep connected. Most associations have wifi available at their larger events (free or for a fee), and the majority report that attendees regularly bring laptops and smart phones.

Wifi Availability at Conferences



% of Attendees Who Bring...	Laptops	Smart Phones
75-100%	8.0	25.9
50-74%	13.6	24.9
25-49%	19.6	15.9
10-24%	15.9	4.7
<10%	18.3	1.0
N/A or Don't Know	24.6	27.6

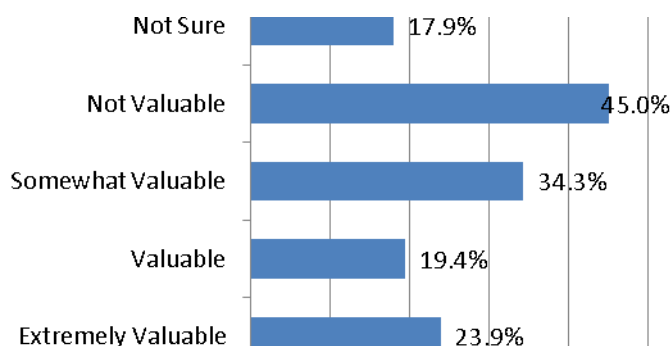
Use of Social Media Networks: General Organizational Focus

More than 80 percent indicated they were already using some sort of free or public social media network, with Facebook being the most frequently cited (59 percent), followed by LinkedIn (46 percent), Twitter (45 percent) and YouTube (25 percent). About 20 percent use no public or free sites.

About 35 percent said they were using a custom-built social media platform, and, of those, over 40 percent rated their network was “extremely valuable” or “valuable.” “Anything to engage the membership and increase participation in the association is enticing,” said one respondent.

Many with custom-built platforms said they were in the beginning stages of rollout to members. As one person reported, “We’re still refining our strategy. We expect it to be extremely valuable at some point, but we have not yet realized its full potential.”

Value of Custom-Built Social Media Platform



Ways Associations Are Using Custom-Built Platforms

- ▶ Posting events, pictures and information
- ▶ Blogging to members from important meetings
- ▶ Answering questions from nonmembers to engage them and invite them to join
- ▶ Continuing education after professional events
- ▶ Promoting conferences
- ▶ Communicating within sub-groups

Use of Social Media Networks: Conference-Specific Focus

Although many associations already use their existing social network platforms (free or custom-built) to promote their conferences, about 19 percent said they have a conference-based social networking website solely dedicated to engaging conference participants before, during and after an event. Another 27 percent are “strongly considering” a social networking site for their events and 44 percent are interested in the idea.

According to the survey, respondents consider the following to be top benefits of having a social networking site built for an event:

- ▶ To create pre-event interest/enthusiasm
- ▶ To facilitate interaction among conference participants
- ▶ To increase attendance
- ▶ To capture summaries, opinions, reviews and other feedback from attendees
- ▶ To allow members who cannot attend stay connected to the conference

“Anything to engage the membership and increase participation in the association is enticing.”

A reoccurring theme found with respondents was the benefit of communication facilitation. As one respondent said, “Delegates appreciate having the ability to network with each other prior to the event.”

Another respondent pointed out that they find value when their system “facilitates interaction between attendees and experts from whom they want information... [this] adds value for the member and the event.” “[We look for] anything to engage them more and make the educational sessions of more concrete value.”

Other respondents talked about the value of being able to share educational materials via a conference social networking site. One association said the system extends the reach and longevity of the conference, and another said the site was valuable because “our members want as many materials, supporting documents and opportunities to share/network as possible.”

One respondent wrote, “Over 50 percent of our conference attendees have indicated that their primary reason for attendance at national meetings is networking.” And another added that they have a social networking system for their conference “to encourage participation and active discussion among attendees.”

Respondents who do not yet have a social networking site for their events also ranked the following as valuable:

- ▶ Connecting attendees with each other through common profile interests
- ▶ Connecting attendees with exhibitors based on their profile needs
- ▶ Helping attendees select educational sessions based on common profile interests
- ▶ Allowing attendees to use online forums to discuss session content and topics

- ▶ Facilitating online interaction between attendees and speakers for questions and answers before/during/after the event
- ▶ Allowing attendees to share files and resources to the conference website as a means to contribute knowledge toward a topic
- ▶ Providing attendees with “daily news” email updates on conference happenings
- ▶ Providing attendees with email updates containing information for sessions and tracks that interest them

Building a Social Networking Site for a Conference Event

Many of the earlier adopters of this technology say patience is the key to making the system work. One association advocates building a system step by step. “Focus on one aspect, then build in other aspects as people begin to use the service and the organization has a better understanding of the goals and possibilities the platform offers,” the respondent wrote. “People will undoubtedly find a use that the organization hadn’t originally thought of.”

Other groups advise others to make sure members are informed of the availability of the new technology. As one respondent said, “There is more interest in participating than we anticipated, but often members aren’t sure how to be active participants – a lot of lurkers and only a handful of early adopters who embrace the technology and contribute to the site.”

“Over 50 percent of our conference attendees have indicated that their primary reason for attendance at national meetings is networking.”

Even the associations that are most resistant to change indicated they know they need to move toward the new technologies. One respondent indicated they need to embrace social networking simply “to keep up with the times.” But associations recognize the time commitments necessary to roll out a social networking site, and many of the respondents without a social network for their conferences indicated they would find value in a system that assists them with many of the tasks required to launch and market a successful site.

- ▶ Half would value a solution that helps them setup and launch a site
- ▶ 73 percent said they would find a system that provides statistics for site usage and participant online behavior “valuable” or “extremely valuable”
- ▶ Another 61 percent would value a solution that helps collect speaker materials for distribution on the conference site
- ▶ More than 60 percent find value in having someone create and execute a conference marketing communication plan for the new site, as well as having someone provide knowledge and execution tactics for implementing a social media strategy for a conference

Closing Remarks

Thank you to all those who responded. Social media for conferences seems to be an integral part of making an event successful both from a marketing and networking/learning enhancement perspective. How an organization chooses to use and embrace social technologies for their meetings should be a high priority. Understanding your audience and how they want to be engaged is critical to successfully implementing any type of online network. More importantly, aligning with experts and dedicating staff to ensure this gets done right could very well make the difference between community success and failure.

About the Author



Chris Uschan is Omnipress’ Marketing Leader. He has over 13 years of experience serving associations and actively follows trends in the meetings industry through many listservs, online communities, blogs and by attending industry events. Chris has pioneered many of the Omnipress digital services including online abstract and speaker file collection and conference CDs and flash drives. Using his strong experience with social media and marketing, he is instrumental in defining and marketing Omnipress’ Conference 2.0™ solution to the meetings industry.

Email: cuschan@omnipress.com
 Twitter: [@chrisuschan](https://twitter.com/chrisuschan)
 Blog: <http://blog.omnipress.com>
 LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin/in/chrisuschan>

About Omnipress

Omnipress provides a suite of services to the meetings industry market including:

- ▶ Online abstract and final paper collection
- ▶ Conference recording
- ▶ Meeting materials in print and on CDs and flash drives
- ▶ Online and ecommerce based archives
- ▶ Conference 2.0™ online event communities

More than 800 associations and meeting professionals trust Omnipress to provide sensible solutions and apply best practices to their unique conference needs each year. Omnipress is known for getting the job done right and on-time while making customers’ jobs easier and their organizations look good.