

NEW MONEY

Virtual conference provides real profits

By Andrew S. Lang

Of all the sources of nondues revenue that I have heard discussed of late, none have proved more attractive, or elusive, than a profitable virtual conference.

The reasons virtual conferences are attractive are obvious: Savings begin with travel costs for everyone involved and go on from there. However, while useful, cutting costs alone does not create net income. For that, you need gross income, and that has proven to be a challenge.

But after months of searching, I am happy to report an example of an association with a truly profitable virtual conference. It is the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, located in Chicago.

According to staff, HIMSS began with one virtual conference in November 2007 and expanded to two each year beginning in 2008. The most recent, in June 2010, ran for two days and provided 25 education sessions, including two keynotes—one of which was U.S. Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra. Continuing medical and nursing education credits totaling 25 hours were available.

HIMSS also provided a “Virtual Lounge” with opportunities to connect with like-minded attendees and participate in discussion forums. Attendees also had IM and email options, including private or group chats.

How It Works

While HIMSS staff would not disclose the exact methodology for determining attendance fees, they did make clear that these fees were not seen as an important source of revenue and were kept low to encourage members to attend. This strategy, and the quality of the offerings, resulted in more than 2,100 individuals visiting the June 2010 conference.

Where, then, is the profit going to come from? The answer is, as with most large

conferences, the exhibitors/sponsors. I use this combined description because that is largely what HIMSS is selling; they call this model “participation packages.”

As the sidebar shows, these “participation packages” can be quite robust. The Ultimate Lead Generation and Visibility Package has a rich array of promotion opportunities. Even the Standard Package, with the lowest cost of six options offered, has four separate benefits.

Also impressive is the lead-tracking system HIMSS offers. To whatever extent possible, exhibitors/sponsors will get information about any and all attendees who visit their booth or attend a session they sponsor. They can chat in real time with those visiting their booth, and, of course, trade business cards.

What floats this operation is the price of those packages. Though all are listed at full rate and then reflect a discount, the net costs range from \$26,400 for the “Ultimate” Package to \$8,228 for the Standard Package. Not exactly chopped liver.

Why It Works

Why are companies such as Microsoft, IBM, Intel, and HP willing to pay substantial fees for virtual-conference exposure? In the end, it is all about HIMSS’ attendees. They are folks who make purchasing decisions on very expensive healthcare information management systems, and they look at what is on offer; the November 2009 virtual show (with 1,900 attendees) averaged 300 visitors per booth.

I want to leave you with a clear understanding of what I learned from HIMSS’ success. All their members are not only computer literate; they are downright comfy with them. Secondly, a significant number are in the position to spend a great deal of money on what exhibitors want to sell.

Thus far, this is the only combination I have heard of that results in a very profitable virtual conference. If you have managed it in some other way, please contact me so that I may share your story with your fellow executives.

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ILLUSTRATION BY LEO ACADIA/THE SPOT.COM

TWO HIMSS VIRTUAL CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION PACKAGES

ULTIMATE LEAD GENERATION AND VISIBILITY PACKAGE

BENEFITS	VALUE
Deluxe Booth	\$15,500
Web Seminar in Education Center	\$7,500
JumboTron Ad in Exhibit Hall	\$3,400
Placement of White Paper or Insert in Virtual Totebag	\$1,700
Display Ad in Show Guide	\$2,900
Ad in Show Daily	\$2,000
Total Package Value:	\$33,000
Package Rate (Less 20%):	\$26,400

STANDARD PACKAGE

BENEFITS	VALUE
Standard Booth	\$3,080
Placement of White Paper or Insert in Virtual Totebag	\$1,700
Display Ad in Show Guide	\$2,900
Ad in Show Daily	\$2,000
Total Package Value:	\$9,680
Package Rate (Less 15%):	\$8,228

To see the complete listing of HIMSS' virtual conference participation packages and the benefits of each, visit www.asacenter.org/associationsnow and click "Now Online."

