

EDUCATION

Get interactive

By Whitney Redding

To create a conference session that is relevant, engaging, and timely for your members, consider adding one more voice to the usual roster of panelists: the audience.

That's what the Society of National Association Publications (SNAP) did in a session called "A Day in the Life of an Association Magazine Publisher" at its recent conferences in Washington, DC, and Chicago. Instead of relegating audience participation to a tail-end Q&A, SNAP harnessed the creativity and insights of a roomful of editors and publishers to address sticky business quandaries.

"My idea was to make it a fun and interactive session to really demonstrate what a crisis is like in a publishing situ-

ation," says organizer Al Rickard, CAE, president of Association Vision. Assigning the audience an active role "completely eliminates any lethargy in the audience and gets them energized."

The session was structured around role playing for specific crises. In one scenario, an association publication was losing profitability. The board of directors (played by the audience) grilled the publication's staff (played by the panelists) and debated what course to take. In other scenarios, the audience played expert publishers or disgruntled advertisers.

Role-playing sessions reveal not only good ideas but also strategies for navigating a process behind the scenes. "People actually weighed in on what the different characters' next step should be," says Apryl Motley, CAE, editorial director at the American Bankers Association, who chaired SNAP's 2008 conference planning committee.

Rickard offers the following tips for an interactive conference session:

Pick the right panel. Choose presenters who are not only experts in their field, but who also are somewhat comfortable with acting in front of an audience.

Tailor scenarios to the time available. "It's got to be simple enough to have people commenting in the right direction and not muddying up the discussion," says Rickard.

Choose the audience's role carefully. "Make it clear to the audience what role they're playing," says Rickard.

Make it humorous.

Plan at least one dry run. Rickard recommends testing out scenarios in advance before a small group of peers to ensure their relevance and conciseness.

Whitney Redding is a freelance writer in the Washington, DC, area. Email: whitneyredding@aol.com