



Conference in a Box

Guide to Planning Your Regional Professional Event

Alliance for Innovation NextERA Advisory Group

CONFERENCE IN A BOX | GUIDE TO PLANNING YOUR REGIONAL PROFESSIONAL EVENT

Overview

Multi-day, national conferences provide excellent opportunities for professional development and networking. However, they can be cost and time prohibitive for public servants at all levels of their careers.

Single-day local or regional conferences and workshops present a chance for professionals to network with others from their neighboring communities and participate in training and development activities without the steep price tag. In-person learning opportunities can be a great deal more engaging than conference calls or webinars.

This document is intended to be used as a guide for planning and implementing such an event.

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About NextERA

NextERA is an advisory group, appointed by the Alliance for Innovation Board of Directors and comprised of up-and-coming professionals in the field of local government. Our mission is to drive AFI member engagement, assist with research on emerging best practices in the field, and advise the Board on strategic opportunities and emerging issues.

Planning the Content

The content of your conference is ultimately what will draw professionals from your area to come together to learn, discuss, and network with each other. Careful thought in the early stages of the planning process will ensure that you create an event that is engaging, informative, valuable, and well run.

Target Audience

The first step in the event planning process is to identify your intended audience. This information will guide you in all of your planning phases. Ask:

- Are you targeting attendees in a particular stage of their career?
- Are you targeting attendees in a particular discipline of local government (e.g. management, communications, public safety, etc.)?
- Is the conference open to just your city? Your state? Your region?
- How many people are you hoping will attend?

Planning Structure

Depending on the size and scope of your event, you should consider the best way to go about planning. If the event is only a few hours and has a smaller audience, it may only require one or two planners to pull it off. However, if it is a half or full day with multiple sessions and activities, we recommend pulling together a committee to distribute tasks and share the work. The committee should have a single designated chairperson who is responsible for maintaining timelines and help move the process along, while individual committee members can be responsible for components of the event, from developing content, serving as moderators, or ensuring logistics are managed smoothly. Here are some things to consider when pulling together a conference planning committee:

- What is a manageable **number** of committee members relative to the size and scope of the event?
- Do you have **diverse** committee members that reflect both your target audience and content focus?
- Is your committee made up of the “**same old same old**” in your region? Can you give someone new an opportunity to contribute?
- Do you have representation from the **Alliance For Innovation**, State Professional Associations, or Colleges and Universities who will not only help to plan but also contribute resources?

Once your committee members have agreed to participate, lay out a planning schedule for the event. You may not always have to meet in person; regular phone or email check-ins can help to hold people accountable without having to spend a great deal of extra time on meetings and transportation.

Event Themes

Developing a theme or primary topic for the event in the early planning stages can help build excitement with your target audience and direct publicity and outreach strategies, along with driving the content you include throughout your conference. Use your imagination to come up with ideas. Examples include:

- Career development
- Diversity in the local government profession
- The future of local government
- New technology
- Regionalism or cross-sector partnerships

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- The multi-generational workforce
- Response to current events or challenges to the profession

Sessions

Once you have identified your audience, established a planning structure, and identified the theme or purpose for your conference, it's time to start brainstorming content. Remember, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing a conference agenda. Don't be afraid to be creative! Here are some tips to consider as you begin developing your sessions:

- It's always nice to know who is in the room. Consider either an informal or formal opportunity for attendees to meet one another. In a very large event this may look like a morning networking hour prior to the start of an event. In a much smaller event with less than 50 people, you may be able to have everyone briefly introduce themselves.
- Your first official session should set the tone for the event. Whether you have a keynote speaker or some sort of group activity, make sure that attendees start the day energized and inspired to learn and network.
- In an event with multiple sessions, use different methods to convey session content. Consider speaker panels, breakout sessions, Q&A opportunities, interactive activities, opportunities to move around, and a mix of audio and visual displays. No one wants to sit through a whole day of simply being talked at.
- Pay attention to the diversity of your speakers.
- Panel discussions can be very valuable if executed well. Be sure to have a skilled moderator to keep the conversation moving, and don't make the panel so large that each speaker is only heard briefly. Attendees appreciate depth of discussion.
- Offer a short break every 90 minutes or less to keep group interested and engaged. 10 minutes is a good length of time.
- Include a variety of participation tools like sticky notes, flip charts, question cards, or virtual participation methods like audience polls.
- Make people laugh!

Managing Logistics

Timing

Your planning committee should be thoughtful about the timing of your event. First and foremost, consider the season. Are your attendees likely to be knee deep in their budget processes or off on vacations? Are there competing events like other professional conferences? Avoid planning your conference during these times.

After you have settled on a date range, identify the day of the week that would most meet the needs of your attendees. If your participants have to travel to attend the event, consider holding it on a Monday or Friday so that they have the weekend to explore the area or minimize their time away from work. In addition, if you are holding a regional event requiring attendees to travel multiple hours, be sure you start late enough in the day and end early enough in the evening to accommodate transportation time.

Location

Your venue may influence your target audience's decision to attend the conference. Be sure to reserve space well in advance of other planning activities because the layout of the venue may impact activities you can or cannot have. Questions to ask yourself include:

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- Is the venue centrally located to capture attendees from a wide radius?
- Is there entertainment and dining located nearby?
- Can you save money by hosting the conference at a public facility or academic institution?
- Does your venue offer support services like technical support, catering, or staffing?
- Is there enough parking for your attendees?
- Is the venue easy to find?
- Does the space have the appropriate capacity for the size of your event?
- Would the local community benefit from the use of a particular venue?
- Does the event require a stage, special seating arrangement, sound, lights, or a simple podium?
- Can you acquire the appropriate insurance?

Food and drink

A well-fed, caffeinated, and hydrated audience is a happy audience. Depending on the length and timing of your event, you should provide some sort of refreshment. At a minimum, offer coffee, water throughout the conference. If your event is longer than a couple of hours, snacks, and even full meals are appropriate. Make sure you or your catering company has the appropriate licenses. Mealtime during your event should be interactive while also giving attendees an opportunity to relax their minds, get to know each other, or check-in with their work responsibilities so that they can focus on the conference content the rest of the time.

Technology

As you plan your conference, consider the technology requirements of the event. You may want to provide:

- Music before and after sessions
- A projector and screen(s) for presentations
- Microphones for presenters
- Wireless internet access

Registration

A registration process is important if you are hosting a larger event. Pre-registration allows conference planners to track expected attendance and ensure you can accommodate everyone who attends with a place to sit, plenty of refreshments, printed materials, and anything else that is provided.

Ideally, provide your attendees the ability to register by email or through an online platform.

Transportation

Your conference could require developing a transportation plan. You may have speakers that require transportation to and from the venue.

As a part of registration materials, be sure to include a map or directions to the conference location along with information regarding public transportation options and parking fees if applicable.

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Budget

Establishing a budget at the beginning of the planning process and tracking it throughout the event will help you to measure the fiscal impact of the conference and determine whether you require charging a registration fee, securing sponsorships, offering scholarships, or conducting other kinds of fundraising. When in doubt, over-estimate! Budget line items will include:

- Registration revenue
- Sponsorship revenue
- Scholarship costs
- Printing expenses
- Promotional items like t-shirts or bags
- Food and beverage
- Venue costs
- Transportation
- Prizes (may be donated)

Getting Attention

After developing amazing content for your conference, the second most important ingredient for success is getting the word out about your event and building excitement.

Publicity

People can't come to your event if they don't know about it. Be sure to publicize the event well in advance and through multiple diverse avenues. Marketing steps include:

- Develop a recognizable brand or logo for the event
- Distribute printed collateral (brochures, flyers, posters) to locations frequented by potential attendees, like public buildings.
- Prepare and share the conference agenda so that people know what to expect from the event
- Use social media (Facebook, Twitter) to get the word out and provide updated information as you get closer to your event. Continue using social media during the event to provide an opportunity for attendees to engage online.
- Take advantage of existing professional networks like your state association or local university to send email invitations to the conference
- Write fun and informative media releases and send out to media
- Ask managers in your target organizations to directly encourage their employees to attend

Incentives

Who doesn't love a free t-shirt? Enticing potential attendees with day-of event raffles, contests, or gifts can get them even more excited about attending your professional conference. These gifts are also a great way to boost energy during the event. Consider holding raffles or small contests throughout the agenda. Prize ideas include:

- Complementary association membership
- Complementary registration to the next conference
- Gift cards or swag from local businesses
- Gift baskets promoting tourism in a local community

Goodie Bags

Don't let your conference attendees walk away empty handed. A goodie bag distributed during check-in or at the conclusion of the event is a great way to share additional information about professional development opportunities, sponsor services, supplemental information to the presentations, a map of the area, or silly giveaways from local communities.

The Day Of

You've planned, booked, budgeted, and publicized... there's only one thing left to do. Host your event without a hitch! NextERA compiled some tips to help you get through your event smoothly.

- Recruit members of your planning committee and other volunteers to staff your event
 - A single point of contact to address last minute needs with venue staff, the caterer, or technical support
 - Designate one or more staff members to coordinate a smooth flow of sessions. These individuals will be responsible to check in with presenters, make sure presentations are working and microphones are in the right place, and be able to help attendees navigate the space
 - Depending on the size of the event, you should determine the right number of volunteers to check attendees into the event smoothly
 - One staff member should be available for last minute needs like fetching additional supplies or picking up food
 - Identify volunteers with bright color t-shirts, polo shirts, or name badge ribbons
 - Equip all staff members with the appropriate supplies such as clip boards, pens, pencils, name tags, office supplies, or other items your event may require
- Have a communications plan in place to facilitate speedy communication throughout the event
 - Develop a contact list containing information on how to reach key event staff
- Start and end the whole conference and each session on time
- Prepare yourself ahead of time that not everything will go exactly how you envisioned it. That's okay, stay alert, stay flexible, and be willing to improvise if something changes beyond your control.
- Make sure you take a moment to enjoy the results of your hard work—you deserve it!

Follow Up

If you ever plan on holding another event again, make sure you adequately follow up with presenters, your planning committee, and conference attendees. Thank you notes or some other form of recognition for all of the people who contributed to the event will build good will and increase the likelihood that you can ask them for help again in the future. As for the conference attendees, it is a great idea to send out a survey or other feedback opportunity within a week after the event. This gives them an opportunity to make recommendations regarding improvements or future event ideas, and helps you stay connected.

Top Ten Ways to Host a Bad Event

Based on the input of NextERA members, the following list will ensure that your conference will be less than successful. Don't make these mistakes!

1. Don't start and end on time
2. Death by PowerPoint
3. Keep people in their seats and don't encourage participation
4. Have sessions lasting longer than 90 minutes without some sort of break
5. Hold the event in the same boring meeting room you always use
6. Use excessive business lingo and buzzwords in your advertisements
7. Plan without creating a budget
8. Schedule your event without first securing your venue
9. Assume the weather will be perfect if the event is outside and do not make a backup plan
10. Assume all of your volunteers will show upon time or at all and do not have extra reserves just in case