

Convention's Over, Now What?

Do you want a packed convention next year? Start with these tips now.

By Michael Casey



Asking franchisees for conference feedback is a standard practice, but what draws them back year after year? Franchise network attendance at conferences can range from 25 percent to more than 60 percent. What a range. Furthermore, reasons for attending (or not) range from "Essential to my future" to "Not necessary for my business," code for "simply not worth it." If so, find out why, and what's important well in advance of next year's convention. With travel costs escalating, owners working long hours, and economic conditions stressing their businesses, a convention needs more than flare.

- Questions don't identify key attendance drivers.
- Survey design doesn't result in high-response rates from attendees.
- Survey delivery is not immediately after events, seminars or group sessions.
- Collection of surveys is manual, causing delayed reporting and analysis.
- Information is not shared with stakeholders in an effective and timely manner.
- Only incomplete quantitative results are produced. No qualitative analysis, insight and recommendations are offered.

There are two major areas that feedback is collected to guide future conventions: feedback after presentations or group sessions and feedback on the overall convention.

Online e-surveys will be the standard.

Some franchisors cut corners on convention surveys during and after conventions, thinking this will give them enough feedback to plan for next year, but it is often a false sense of security. The inappropriate and shoddy analysis will only result in data that doesn't truly identify key opinions of attendees and what will drive attendance up.

Gathering feedback appears easy, but often not effective

What are the main reasons franchisors don't effectively manage the feedback process? Mainly, because cranking out a survey sounds so easy. Just create paper surveys or online questions using SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang to get it out. Right? Well, sort of. These two surveying tools are excellent if one knows what he is doing, but breakdowns occur typically because of the following:

Gather effective presentation and group feedback

Surveys following a presenter or educational session should be short, measuring the value of the session and the performance of the presenter. This survey process is typically the most difficult to manage. Most organizations still use the paper-on-the-table technique collecting feedback after each session. More progressive organizations use online surveying techniques setting up kiosks, offering incentives to drive participation or e-surveying. Another technique involves renting handheld devices distributed to each attendee. To many this is cost prohibitive. In the future, online e-surveys will be the standard as more owners begin to use Internet-connected personal digital assistants. This will allow attendees to fill out the survey on their PDA immediately; eliminating paper, re-entering data, renting devices and delayed reporting. E-

Of the following activities, please tell us if we should have more, less, or the same amount of them next year.

	More Of	The Same	Less Of
Owner-Peer Group Meetings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
New Vendor Trainings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Trade Show Hours	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Formal Entertainment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free Time to Meet Colleagues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Corporate Executive Face Time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Trainings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Owner Panels with Case Studies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Owner Presentations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sharing Innovations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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surveying via a PDA is just around the corner, but for now franchisors need to be creative. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Make sure the survey response ratings will clearly reveal if the presenter should be invited back. A great question is "Should this presenter be invited back again?" Pretty direct, but it's better know to create a packed house.
- Leave two minutes at the end of each session to ask everyone to fill out the survey and make the questions brief. Getting the feedback immediately following a session will provide the richest feedback. There must be a discipline for this to happen. Get a details person to manage this.
- Give attendees alternative methods for giving detailed feedback. Paper, kiosks, rented hand-held units or online survey on PDA. Be flexible and offer multiple methods to make it easy for attendees and to drive feedback. Data from all sources can often be consolidated easily with automation.
- Put someone in charge of the collection process and measure his performance.
- If the organization is focused on paper surveying, have an interface set up to quickly enter all results following each session. Conference help can stay ahead of data entry and reports can be automatically created using inexpensive, off-the-shelf technology.
- Always have at least one open-ended question, but be specific for qualitative information. A great question is

"What was the No. 1 actionable take-away from this session?"

- Seek out respected franchisees to fully understand the value and overall impression of the session. Have someone from the corporate office seek out and ask in person. The interviewer should be a trusted, objective observer who can read between the lines and summarize commentary to support the quantitative analysis.

Gather good overall convention feedback

Overall convention feedback is typically conducted a week following the convention, but some actually take the time at the wrap-up session as the convention is winding down. If you aren't gathering feedback at wrap-up, the best way to gather feedback is via a Web-based survey e-mailed to attendees from an executive. Sending a reminder the following week may be necessary to drive response rates. Keep the survey short to less than five minutes and you should receive over 50 percent response rates. Some franchisors may also call owners to conduct a phone-based survey. This is effective if the owners are computer-challenged or if you want complete participation. Always send a thank you e-mail message to everyone outlining what you learned from the responses. This builds loyalty, drives future survey participation and shows you are planning an even better program next year.

Effectively putting conference information into action

The best-run franchises collect both qualitative and quantitative information immediately after every event, analyze it thoroughly, and communicate findings back to all stakeholders, meanwhile planning for an improved, enhanced convention next year. Sounds like a lot of work? Not really if it is built into the convention process, ownership is clear, and quality control of the process is managed. Leverage off-the-shelf technology to automate the inviting, collecting, and reporting processes. If the franchise company is technology-challenged, hire a low-cost outsource

company that specializes in designing and managing survey projects. Surveying now takes a fraction of the time and money compared to just a few years ago.

Effective surveying will uncover new ideas.

Andrew Akers, vice president of operations for Signs By Tomorrow, a 180-unit franchise headquartered near Columbia, Md., has built franchisee surveying into its strategic planning. The company collects feedback regularly in three areas: marketing initiatives, conferences and overall franchisor operations. When it comes to the conference, Akers shares all information openly with all stakeholders. First, the information is collected immediately following the convention. Then the information is reviewed with management within two weeks while information is still fresh in everyone's mind. The organization then shares all information with its franchise advisory council. This group consists of respected franchisees selected to represent the entire network. Akers explains "The entire network participates in the planning. Our convention's purpose is to help them become more successful in the coming year. They are on the street daily and know what they need."

During the post-convention FAC meeting, the group reviews the results and together lay out enhancements and improvements for the following year. Planning for the coming year's convention starts 11 months in advance. Attendance at these conventions is consistently above 55 percent of the network. There is no better feeling to a franchisee as to when he recommends an idea to improve a convention and sees it implemented the following year. While every idea can not be added, effective surveying will uncover new ideas or improvements on existing elements of the convention.

Another great idea is to give little updates during the year. First, thank everyone for their feedback and share what was learned from that feedback.

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