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Professional Meetings: Planning and Performing Multiple Location Tours for Maximum Benefit and Impact

J Larry Oldham

Mississippi State University Extension Service, loldham@pss.msstate.edu



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Professional Meetings: Planning and Performing Multiple Location Tours for Maximum Benefit and Impact

Abstract

State, regional, national, and international meetings in agricultural and natural resource professions often include educational tours in or near the host city. Education improves if the tours are well-planned and executed. Contingency planning is integral to the process; plan for bad things to occur. Evaluation planning, implementation, and communication are tools for improving future professional meeting tours.

J. Larry Oldham

Extension Professor - Soils
Mississippi State University Extension Service
Mississippi State, Mississippi
oldham@pss.msstate.edu

Introduction

Professional meetings are increasingly expensive investments for individuals and/or their employing institutions in money and time away from the office. State, regional, national, and international meetings of agricultural and natural resource professions often include educational tours to highlight unique features in the vicinity. To justify the cost during tight budgetary times, distant meetings must offer high-quality programming that provides clear and effective education.

I have participated in professional tours as client, tractor driver, content provider, planner, and coordinator. My experience ranges from fantastic to horrible. Not all of my bad tour experiences could have been mitigated by better planning, preparation, or performance. However a systematic approach may lessen the pain endured by Extension clients and improve program impact.

The goal is an effective educational experience for professionals who are investing time and institutional support in the exercise. Hawkins and Southard (2001) provided a detailed checklist for planning, implementing, and evaluating Extension field days with a 6-month gestation period from first planning to follow-up evaluations. This discussion focuses on the special considerations for multiple site events that may involve planning timelines of a year or more.

Planning

Successful tours begin with successful planning processes. If a meeting is important enough for people to travel great distances to attend, it is important enough to devote adequate time and personnel to planning, practicing, and providing. Collaborative processes between the sponsoring organization and the planning, facilitation, and implementation team need to start early (Taylor-Powell & Rossing, 1998).

The model below offers a general planning and implementation guideline.

Situation

Participants in the meetings of agricultural/natural resources professional groups are often interested in learning about unique operations and practices available in the vicinity of their conferences.

Resources/Inputs

Adequate financial resource commitment at the beginning is critical. Transportation, insurance, refreshments, meals, speaker stipends and/or travel, and other anticipated costs must be anticipated. Local knowledge and assets in organizations, individuals, and community resources must be utilized in implementation. Extension personnel often have unique blends of interactions in the area, including individuals, private technical service providers, other agencies (local, state, and federal), financial organizations, and stakeholder groups that can facilitate local activities to meet the planning needs of the professional group.

Actions

Numerous activities are necessary before a successful professional meeting tour. This list likely is not complete for every tour, but should provide starting points for discussion.

- Define the tours goals. Are they to survey several features of the area? Are they to provide an in-depth examination of an issue indigenous to the region? Know what you are attempting to do.
- Clearly define objectives, and address them with interesting, timely, educational, and well-presented topics.
- Get the logistics; time is important to people. Be efficient in all time management. Have food and beverages where they are supposed to be, when they are supposed to be there. Try to minimize road time unless there is an educational component to the travel.
- Account for the elements. If the tour is mid-summer, assume it will be hot, and plan accordingly. If the tour is mid-winter, assume it will be cold. If you will be 40 miles from the nearest town at lunch, plan for it.
- Practice. Do dry runs of tour routes, particularly close to the event, as road construction can change routes dramatically. Work with speakers; some may require help clarifying and presenting their message to meet the audience needs and expectations.
- Remember and respect diversity and challenges. Determine special needs in advance, such as physical and accessibility factors, language issues, or special dietary concerns.
- Define and plan for worst-case scenarios and contingencies, including bad weather, equipment malfunctions, transportation issues, illnesses, or injury accidents.
- Develop an evaluation plan (see below).
- Write thank you notes or letters to planning committee members, speakers, hosts, vendors, tour leaders, and everyone who helped.

Participants/Target Audiences

Participants in national and/or international professional meeting tours are often well educated and informed, plan and implement their own professional meetings, and have high expectations for education to amplify their own endeavors. To justify the time and expense of the professional tour, it is important to know their expectations, and meet or exceed them.

Outcomes

Short-term outcomes are changes in attitude, knowledge, skills, and behavior.

Additionally, tour events may have organizational outcomes such as improvement or changes in future tours and improved resource effectiveness. Capturing these outcomes requires multiple evaluation tools such as immediate or post-event participant surveys and post-event planning committee debriefings (Taylor-Powell & Rossing, 1998, Table 3).

Longer term outcomes are more difficult to assess. Intermediate results depend on implementation by the audience. Long-term results are changed conditions. Evaluation at these time frames is the role and responsibility of the sponsoring entities through time.

Summary

Successful multi-location professional tours are the result of planning, preparation, and practice processes that justify the significant resource investment. Time, money, and other assets must be inventoried and employed wisely to maximize results. Contingency planning and evaluation development are critical elements of event planning.

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