

Out with the Old, In with the New: What to do  
When an Event has run its Course

**A Missouri Bar Annual Meeting Experience**

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## **A Missouri Bar Annual Meeting Experience**

### **REVERSING THE TREND OF DECLINING ATTENDANCE**

The attendance at The Missouri Bar Annual Meeting had been declining for several years. In 2001, a special committee was appointed to identify and examine the reasons behind the negative trend, as well as to develop and implement strategies to attract higher levels of attendance.

Starting with the appointment of that committee and a survey of the membership, numerous changes resulted. These changes, which were implemented beginning with the 2002 Annual Meeting and have had positive results, are outlined below.

### **CHANGE IS IN THE AIR: CAREFULLY SELECTED COMMITTEE TAKES CHARGE**

The first change involved creating a new committee charged with creating a meeting format that responds to the needs and wants of members and that would attract more attendees.

#### **Leadership Is Critical**

Change can be difficult, and uncertainty about the success or failure of new ideas can paralyze progress. Members of the new planning committee were selected because they represented a cross-section of membership, they brought an open-minded approach to the process and they were committed to The Missouri Bar.

Just as importantly, committee leadership played a critical role. The Missouri Bar President, in office during this period, was willing and interested in entertaining and implementing change.

More importantly, the President assigned committee leadership to a member who had the experience, demeanor and specific skills to lead a transformation of a meeting. Specifically, the President appointed a bar member who had been the architect and creative force behind the creation, development and continued success of the bar's very popular Solo & Small Firm Conference.

#### **An Important Attitude**

The committee had and continues to adhere to an attitude that any changes should be guided by member wants and needs, not personal preference. Patience and time would be needed to evaluate success; the effects of a change may not be apparent the first year they are implemented. Not every change will work, so flexibility is essential.

### **LISTENING TO MEMBERSHIP**

To begin the process, The Missouri Bar staff conducted a telephone survey of a diverse sample of the members. The survey sample included:

- (1) new lawyers who had never attended a meeting;
- (2) older, established lawyers who had not attended a meeting;
- (3) the core group of regular attendees;

- (4) dropouts who attended one meeting but never returned
- (5) and judges

The purpose of the survey was to identify perceptions of the Annual Meeting, to isolate factors behind decreasing attendance or the perceived lack of interest in the conference and to explore what would be needed to attract more lawyers and judges to the meeting.

While members expressed a wide range of thoughts and ideas, a common thread emerged as key obstacles to Annual Meeting attendance:

- (1) time constraints
- (2) cost
- (3) relevance, value to a lawyer's specific practice

In short, responses can be summed up with the phrase "time is money." Respondents explained that the decision to attend a meeting is guided by the benefit and relevance of the meeting to the specific lawyer's practice. There are a lot of CLE providers offering programs specifically relevant to a lawyer's practice area that compete with the Annual Meeting. Dynamic programs are needed - boring formats, speakers and inferior programming must be avoided.

The survey revealed some very specific perceptions about past Missouri Bar Annual Meeting programming that proved very useful. These perceptions included:

- (1) CLE offered was too broad, not relevant to attendee practice areas
- (2) formal sit down dinners, long speeches, awards ceremonies were boring and unpopular
- (3) CLE programs featuring one-way communication by a single "talking head" presenter is less interesting to lawyers
- (4) travel required to attend the meeting was an obstacle
- (5) past programming did not justify cost and time away from office
- (6) prominent speakers were popular and positive
- (7) meeting did offer valuable networking opportunities

## **MAJOR MEETING COMPONENT/FORMAT CHANGES**

Guided by the results of the member's survey, the committee focused on examining ways to create a new format that would respond to members needs. Several long held meeting components were thrown out in favor of new ones. Changes were made to the CLE programming components, instituting CLE tracks and plenary sessions, and the committee threw out the traditional formal dinners in favor of a new look to social activities.

### **CLE Programs Offer Quantity But Lacked Relevance**

One survey respondent described a key problem with CLE programming at the Annual Meeting by comparing the meeting to a department store, offering a little something for everyone, but going on to explain that most lawyers are looking for a specialty store that provides a direct

impact on their specific practice.

This was an accurate analogy. Previously, bar committees and members were given the opportunity to conduct a CLE program of their choosing. The resulting programs may have had great interest to lawyers, a limited interest to lawyers or be of very little interest. Consequently, a given lawyer may find several programs relevant to his or her practice while another lawyer may find only one or fewer programs that specifically impact his or her practice area. This approach made it difficult for lawyers to justify the cost and time away from the office.

### **The Answer: Substantive CLE Tracks**

To respond to the member needs for CLE programming that is relevant, useful and valuable, the committee made a major format change, concentrating all CLE programs into six, and later five substantive tracks. Each track area would contain, four or five programs related to the substantive area.

While concentrating CLE programming into six areas limits the substantive areas represented, it accomplished a very important objective. Lawyers are clearly able to justify time away and cost, by having an opportunity to attend four or five programs in a particular substantive area or cross-over between track areas to take advantage of programs that will make a difference in their practice.

### **Right or Wrong: Which Tracks Areas to Feature**

Selecting the right six substantive track areas is an art, rather than a science. The committee remains flexible in selecting track areas. In fact, four tracks initially selected and implemented in 2002 have survived for 2003 and 2004. Two tracks have been changed based on interest level.

### **CLE Track Changes Over Time**

#### **CLE Tracks for 2002**

Business/Corporate Law  
Civil Practice and Procedure  
Criminal Law  
Family Law  
Probate, Trust and Elder Law  
Solo & Small Firm

#### **CLE Tracks for 2003**

Business/Corporate Law  
Civil Practice and Procedure  
Family Law  
Probate, Trust and Elder Law  
Professionalism  
Solo & Small Firm

#### **Planned CLE Tracks for 2004**

Business/Corporate Law

Civil Practice and Procedure  
Family Law  
Probate, Trust and Elder Law  
Evolving Legal Issues

### **Guidelines Dictated for CLE Track Presenters and Format**

Surveying revealed that members were attracted to dynamic, presentations. The traditional “talking head” presenter and lecture format was considered boring. The committee established preferable guidelines for all the CLE track programming, which included:

- (1) encouraging multiple presenters and panels formats, rather than lecture styles
- (2) encouraging presenters to conduct interactive programs, actively involving the audience when possible
- (3) encouraging ethnic and gender diversity among presenters

### **CLE PLENARY SESSIONS - PROMINENT SPEAKERS, CUTTING-EDGE TOPICS**

While relevant, useful CLE through the newly instituted track format was a very important change, the committee also created a program component that could attract and be relevant to all attendees - plenary sessions. This component was implemented to bridge all practice areas by focusing on important, timely issues and featuring nationally and statewide prominent experts.

Many survey respondents who never attended a meeting held a positive perception that the Annual Meetings featured a unique opportunity to hear prominent speakers. Similarly, those who attended the Annual Meeting regularly valued the opportunity to hear such speakers. The committee capitalized on this positive by creating three plenary component spots at the Annual Meeting, and framing the content of these sessions to pertain to timely, cutting issues in the news or facing the profession.

Topic covered have included:

- National Security versus Personal Freedom after 9/11
- Impact of Life Science Discoveries on the Law
- The Past, Present and Future of Judicial Review
- Brown v. Board after Gratz and Grutter
- A View from Washington with Howard Fineman
- Lawyers Independence – post-Enron
- Sarbanes-Oxley: Lessons Learned

An example of presenters:

- Former directors of the CIA and FBI
- SEC Commissioners
- U.S. Attorney General’s Office Representatives
- State Supreme Court Judges
- Political Media Correspondents
- Multidisciplinary members of University Faculty

Like the CLE Track programming guidelines, these sessions:

- 1) favor multiple presenters/panels, rather than lecture formats
- (2) encouraging presenters to conduct interactive programs actively involving the audience; question and answer periods
- (3) encouraging ethnic and gender diversity among presenters
- (4) when possible, involving an interdisciplinary, rather than law dominated speakers/panelists

## **CHANGES IN MARKETING AND PROMOTION**

### **Early Promotion, More Promotion, Integrated Approach**

Survey results showed that respondents were aware of the Annual Meeting through promotional materials. However, aside from creating the general impression that the meeting features prominent speakers and social events, the promotional material did not communicate how lawyers would specifically benefit from attending.

The committee implemented a change to the time line for developing the meeting content, so promotional materials could provide detailed information earlier and utilize multiple distribution channels. The anticipated result would be a more effective promotional effort that allows an opportunity to isolate messages that would resonate with and communicate the value of the meeting to lawyers.

### **Content Driven Print Materials**

With speakers committed and program content developed earlier, printed notices announcing the meeting are more effective. This also allows for the use of a variety of distribution methods. In addition to mail distribution to all members, the printed notices are distributed at all Missouri Bar CLE programs, as well as, meetings of other local and specialty bar associations.

### **Electronic Promotional Vehicles**

The Missouri Bar began utilizing Internet technology as an integrated part of the promotional efforts.

#### *ESQ* - Weekly Electronic Newsletter

Information on different aspects of the meeting is highlighted in an electronic newsletter received by about 65% of Missouri Bar members every Friday. These include announcements about the program content is developed, and starting six weeks out, a regular section is devoted to the meeting, featuring a different aspect of the meeting each week.

#### Annual Meeting Web site

With the committee emphasis on integrated promotion, a specific Annual Meeting Web site is now created each year, filled with the content and links related to the meeting. The Web site is a critical information source for use with *ESQ* and list server promotion. The Web site allows for the attractive, inexpensive communication of detail related to the meeting content and offers convenient, easy methods of registration.

#### List Server Promotion

Missouri Bar Committee/Section list servers became another effective channel for very targeted

promotional efforts. While used conservatively, this vehicle is integrated with links to Web site content, communicating the parts of the meeting that are directly related to a specific substantive area and to the very specific audience.

#### Targeted Mailings

Inexpensive, but attractive mailing pieces are developed and included with other Missouri Bar CLE mailings, again targeted to specific substantive segments of the bar.

### **SOCIAL ACTIVITIES - FORMAL TO INFORMAL**

Although survey respondents saw value in the social events and networking opportunities that are part of the Annual Meeting, the value wasn't enough, all alone, to justify the cost and time away from the office and family. Respondents also had some negative comments, relating to the types of social activities that aren't attractive - formal dinners, long speeches, and endless awards ceremonies turned members off.

The committee listened and replaced the traditional opening night formal dinner and awards program with a casual, informal reception. With a very popular "Best of Missouri" reception occupying the second night of the meeting, the new format would now be dominated with friendly receptions.

Just one formal dinner remained under the new meeting format, and that dinner would change to a separately ticketed event on the final night of the meeting. The dinner would serve as the venue to present all awards, along with the passing of the presidential gavel. However, the committee also took the opportunity to influence the format of the dinner program, making it fast-paced and entertaining. Interestingly enough, the number of people attending this dinner has doubled in the two years since the new format was first implemented, with about 60% of the total meeting registrants attending.

#### **Closing the Circle: Evaluations and Program Attendance**

The committee initially relied on feedback from members and attendees to guide the changes made to the Annual Meeting format. This approach continues and has been institutionalized as a key part of the Annual Meeting planning process.

To ensure that attendees take the time to tell the committee what they thought of the meeting, everyone who completes a detailed evaluation becomes eligible to win a vacation for two (often a cruise). This effort has been very successful, with more than half of meeting attendees completing an evaluation form.

While the overall meeting registration numbers and evaluation comments show important views of the conference, attendance figures for each program also provides valuable information used by the committee to evaluate the ongoing popularity of a plenary subject or track area. For example, plenary sessions have been gaining in popularity; attendees express this through the evaluations, and this is supported by a doubling of attendance for plenary sessions from 2002-2003. On the other hand, low attendance in the Criminal Law and Solo & Small Firm tracks resulted in the elimination of these tracks in favor of substantive areas.

## **THE RESULTS: TWO YEARS OF INCREASED ATTENDANCE**

The new format changes have had positive results. Declining attendance was halted with the first meeting under the new format. Attendance has increased by 17 percent since the changes were implemented.

More importantly, those attending indicated that programming met the mark; satisfaction levels for CLE tracks and plenary session conducted in 2003 were remarkably high.

## **SUMMING UP**

While format changes have resulted in much higher satisfaction and the reversal of declining attendance, nothing can be taken for granted.

Using a baseball metaphor, each year is a new season. There is no time to rest on any past laurels for any meeting or program can fall flat and quickly turn into a humbling experience. In fact, these figures are considered a very limited success since ultimate attendance expectations are much higher than those attained to date.

Consequently, the special planning committee, which developed the new format has become a permanent committee. Each year, additional facets of the meeting are reviewed and subject to changes based on the needs and wants of membership.