What Is Your Hospitality Quotient?

Most of us are experienced with continuing nursing education (CNE) program planning. We know how to put together a course, a series of activities, or even a conference that is based on identified gaps, as well as a selection of great speakers who can present content that is free from bias. We comply with conflict of interest and disclosure requirements and gather evaluation data that provide useful feedback about outcomes. However, I believe that providing successful CNE goes beyond crafting the “architecture.” Part of our responsibility is to fashion an atmosphere that sets the stage for learning and enhances the overall experience. I believe the role of the provider must also incorporate that of a host or hostess. After all, we are inviting folks into our “house.”

SETTING THE STAGE

The idea for this article originated from participation in several CNE events, as well as discussions with others who have had less than satisfactory CNE experiences. A conference or symposium can be great, presenting cutting edge information, top notch speakers, built-in opportunities for interaction, and exercises that help us learn how to apply the content. However, if the hospitality quotient is lacking, the CNE program can be a disappointing experience. When I register for a conference, I like to know ahead of time what amenities I can expect, such as how to get there, where to park, whether breakfast/coffee/lunch will be provided, and whether I am expected to complete any preliminary work.

I believe that those of us who provide CNE serve as the face of our organizations. The more polished, welcoming appearance we provide, the better. This begins with the participant’s confirmation of attendance and continues throughout the program. Attendees like to see a friendly face and be made to feel that their participation is appreciated. The kind of reception that attendees receive at the registration table sets the tone for the entire event. I was not happy with a recent sign-in experience that did not include a “Good Morning,” a smile, or anything that indicated “Welcome, glad you are here.” I was instructed to find my name tag from the 80 or so badges that were randomly spread on a table. When I found my badge, I was asked to shuffle through several pages of other names in order to sign in. Registration certainly did not feel well coordinated. To add to the lack of graciousness, no niceties, such as note paper or pens, were provided. Perhaps there was an assumption that we would bring our computers or tablets, but we were not informed of this.

Welcoming remarks should engage learners and let them know more about what to expect from the CNE program. One CNE program I attended had no official welcome from the podium. The speaker was introduced, and off we went. No overview of the day was provided, nor was information given about the layout of the facility, the location of the restrooms, or other pertinent items. When giving opening remarks to a group, I try to make sure that folks know what the day is going to
look like and what they can expect. I may briefly share summarized participant information, such as their roles and the number or names of the states represented in the audience. This offers a more complete picture of who is attending, and it gives the speaker a better sense of who the attendees are. If I do not have access to such background information, I may choose to poll the group by asking for a show of hands.

INFORMATION THAT SHOULD BE PROVIDED TO LEARNERS

I have discovered that one way to add to our hospitality quotient is to send out a “What You Need to Know Before You Go” electronic announcement, e-mail, or letter (Table). Registrants seem to appreciate the heads-up information. We (other members of the continuing education provider unit at my university and I) begin the announcement with a “Thank you for registering for [title of the conference].” General information is shared about the meeting site (name, address, and phone number). Specifics on transportation and parking are included, such as ground transportation options like shuttle provider names, phone numbers, approximate costs and where to connect, estimated taxi fares, and parking costs. Because some participants may be interested in sightseeing, we provide links to area attractions and/or the local convention and visitors’ bureau.

The location and times for conference registration, including the opportunity for early registration, is provided. If there are exhibits, we list the days and times. If attendees are coming from a distance, we include information about the expected weather, such as “The current weather outlook shows that temperatures will average xx-xx degrees during the day and xx-xx degrees in the evening. There is only a xx% chance of rain.” We remind folks that “The dress code for the event is business casual. Remember, meeting rooms tend to be cool, so you may want to bring a sweater or light jacket.” We also inform participants about the refreshments, meals, or receptions that are included with their registration.

If a “flipped classroom” model is being used, participants must be notified in advance so that they can fit the assignments into their schedule. Instructions for and links to the preparatory materials should be sent out in a timely manner; with short notice, it is tough to complete the work before the meeting.

When handouts are distributed electronically, we include specifics on the Web address, which handouts are offered, and the length of time they will be available for download. Some hotels and conference locations do not have business centers on site. If this is the case, it is a good idea to let registrants know so that they should not arrive expecting to be able to print handouts on site. If participants will be sharing posters during the conference, details regarding poster set-up and take-down times are included in “What You Need to Know Before You Go.” If we are handing out copies of the poster abstracts, we add that, too.

More often, our evaluations are completed electronically. If they are available electronically, we provide information on when and where to find the link. We let folks know how long the evaluation will be available and that the issuance of certificates depends on completion of the evaluation. If evaluations are to be turned in on site, we remind participants to do so before leaving the conference. We ask attendees to take credit for only the sessions they have attended. Any particulars regarding attendance certificates, such as when they will be issued or how to download a copy, will also be shared. At the end of the message, we list the link to our website and a telephone number to use in case of questions. We close the “What You Need to Know Before You Go” with a message that we look forward to seeing them at the conference and wish them safe travels.

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE

When we have hosted conferences that were built on a call for abstracts, I have included a personal letter to each presenter in their registration packet thanking them for sharing their knowledge and expertise with the participants and detailing the location and time of their session. Specifics about technology support are also provided. My hope is that the information will help to allay their anxiety, while making them feel appreciated for their contribution.

CONCLUSION

I encourage you to evaluate your organization’s hospitality quotient and refashion it, if necessary. A robust quotient is one way to set the stage for learning, to engage participants, and to increase their involvement in and commitment to the educational process.