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**DENHARDT**

— **Productions** —

# Walls Not Required

An A-Z Guide for Unique Learning Formats

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# The Preamble

In an effort to stop delivering a recycled conference that is simply a lather-rinse-repeat carbon copy from last year, this Guide is intended to ruffle some feathers and stir creative juices. Challenge those naysayers who argue “but we have always done it that way” and test some new ideas that you can infuse into your next event. **Delight**, **surprise** and **awe** your attendees as well as your staff and volunteers! It can be a challenging juggle to manage the many details of a multi-layer conference – especially now as the demands to pivot to digital and hybrid are seemingly here to stay. While you work to design an unique and memorable experience, I dare you to *stretch*, **reach**, and **diversify** your offerings. Enjoy – and let know what you try!

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## Ask the Experts

Attendees come to your conference to connect with their peers, to learn and to grow professionally. They expect keynotes, breakout sessions, meal functions, and expo halls. But what about **exclusive access**? In addition to the traditional conference elements, what about providing access to your keynote speakers beyond the sage-from-the-stage environment. Can you provide an exclusive Q&A session for your Foundation Donors? If some of your members or presenters are published, provide their books, and offer an **Author Series** for attendees to learn and ask questions. If you recognize leaders in your industry with awards, how about holding an Award Winners’ Debrief where the awardee can dive deeper than their quick walk across the stage and “thank you” from the mic. Create a space for these innovators to share their story and answer questions.

## Basecamp

Don't let your new member or first time attendee get lost in the crowd. Provide an opportunity for them to get together before the conference kicks off to network with fellow newbies in addition to those seasoned members. Can they have early access to that opening networking reception to avoid that intimidating experience of walking into a unknown room. Let them have easy access to connect with Board members and staff. Provide a newbie sticker or ribbon so they are easily recognized - and then have a **Squad of Welcome Ambassadors** peppered throughout the conference to welcome, greet, and make connections with the newbies. With any luck you can turn a one-time attendee into a "regular" and a new member into a lifetime one. (Credit: [CalSAE](#) always offers a Basecamp welcome to their first time attendees either via a new member orientation or first timer welcome, and this idea is nothing short of brilliant!)

## Customization

We are consumer culture living in a world of convenience and customization. Nearly everything we need is available to us at the click of a button. We get what we want, when we want, exactly how we want it. [Personalization is key!](#) How can your conference or event tailor its experience so each individual person can customize their own unique experience? Can they design their conference badge? Can they cast their vote on what sessions you accept for inclusion in the education line up? Consider the comforts of home and how we live our lives – and how your attendees bring their whole selves with them. Remember that the comforts and conveniences of their everyday life is exactly the expectation they have when they attend *your* conference. Do your best to match those expectations – or better yet – **exceed** them!

## Debate/Boxing Ring

There will always be differing opinions on the challenges and possible solutions impacting your industry. So, **Be Bold. Be Brave**, and get right out in front of it to talk about. Point-counterpoint is a technique used to present two different sides of an issue. This format is effective at showing differing viewpoints and allowing for equal time on each side. A solid moderator is a **must** to manage the dialogue. The classic style is three rounds, made up of an opening statement, a rebuttal, and a closing statement. The "boxing ring" as it were, allows for each argument to be made, to be countered, and to be restated simply. And, hopefully allows a space for the audience to reach their own conclusions. Why hide behind an issue when you can get right out in front of it instead?

## Experience Design

People don't come to conferences just for content. They come to connect. For meaningful conversations and memorable experiences. People want to share stories, to learn from one another, to feel connected and be part of the community. This is an essential part of the human condition. **Creating exceptional experiences** continues to be the [main currency in our economies](#). We are a culture thirsty for experiences. These real-life experiences are gold – which is why people take time away from work and family – and often money out of their own pocket to travel and participate at a conference (physically or virtually). So, it is our job as event designers to create unique and memorable experiences at our conferences and programs. Please **oh please** do not just replicate from one year to the next! Take some risks, and try new formats.

## Flash Learning

Provide a designated area in a common space or foyer with some comfortable (non-traditional) seating where pop-up conversations can be scheduled around specific topics. This can be low-tech with a flipchart for attendees to indicate a date/time and topic they want to discuss. The time slots and topics are on a first-come-first-serve basis and should be organic - not sales pitches. Have 20-30 minute time slots available and see what happens. (Of course you can use technology or your conference app - but sometimes keeping it simple is best.)

## Gamification

Gamify your Exhibit Hall experience with a little healthy competition. Engage members with a fun, rewarding, memorable game uniquely relevant to your event and your organization by grouping attendees in teams that challenges their industry knowledge and gets them purposefully interacting with exhibitors. Who doesn't love a little healthy competition to incentivize attendees to immerse themselves in your event experience.

## Hands-on

Everyone learns differently. While the visual learner can simply see something and the auditory learner can hear something, the physical learner best retains information by feeling and actually experiencing it. Can you create an open area for some real-time, hands-on, try-it-yourself experiential formats in which attendees "play" with new things. What about a technology or innovations playground? What new shiny objects are relevant in your industry like VR or bots or other new devices? Bring in volunteers and members to support the efforts and showcase their them as the experts.

## Inspire

The conference schedule is set and folks know where to be and when – but what about the in-between times? Offer some levity with a local musician entertaining folks while they wait in that conference registration line to pick up their badge, turning Registration into a *Regi-ception*. Bring an unscheduled person of interest to the stage during your opening general session. All work and no play will break the conference experience. Surprise your attendees. Keep them curious about what will happen next – and compel them to come back year after year for fear of missing out on the next big reveal. In short, **delight, surprise and awe** your audience!

## **Just a Demo**

Your exhibitors deserve more time to demo their product(s) and services beyond the exhibit hours. BUT your attendees don't want to be sold to if they are not expecting it - like when they think they are sitting down to an education session but a sales pitch sneaks its way into the content. Schedule specific times for 15-20 minute demos with a limited number of your vendors/industry partners.

***BONUS: This is a revenue generation opportunity too!***

## **Knowledge Diversity**

Be sure you have diversity of thought represented on the stage of your sessions. Optics matter – and so does myriad knowledge expertise, topic variety, and more. This of course goes beyond age - but all the many facets that the word diversity embodies. AND! While it is great to bring back those speakers who are near and dear to your hearts - who always get those great ratings - there is a risk in looking like a recycled conference. Shake it up with topics, content leaders, and all the rest! And please, set your speakers up for success with the right information, advice, background information and expectation of your attendees. Provide tips and tricks to deliver their content – and [how to design their visual aids](#).

## **Location – Location - Location**

Ever traveled to a destination you were eager to explore, only to move between windowless conference rooms for two days while attending that conference? While there absolutely reason for the traditional roomset, there is also something hugely valuable about getting offsite, outside, and off the grid. As event designers, variety is the name of the game - so be sure to provide a mix of learning and networking opportunities that leverage the city and destination. Provide experiential tours. Curate a musical pub crawl through the city. Let your active folks come together for a sunset bike ride before the evening reception. Conversely, let folks take a break from a packed day of learning, networking, and expo hall walking, to explore the city or location you are in before “turning it all back on” to network at your can't-miss, evening function.

## **Micro-mentoring**

Embed opportunities into the conference schedule for scheduled one-on-one conversations with professionals with myriad expertise. Please don't limit yourself just to that seasoned member in the industry. While he/she is hugely valuable, so is a young professional with fresh perspective - and everyone else in between.

## Networking with Speed

Okay, so this is really speed-networking. If you haven't tried it yet, it isn't too late. This structured and fast-paced format accelerates the number of professional contacts attendees can make in a condensed amount of time. The essence of speed networking is implemented through round-robins where the facilitator indicates the start of each round with a bell or buzzer. Attendees find one person to network with in short conversation and exchange of business cards. Each person is given an allotted time to speak before switching roles. Then the buzzer rings – and the next round robin begins. Speedy indeed!

## Office Hours

How often have you attended a session and loved what the speaker had to say but the clock was ticking and you needed to move on to the next activity? Chances are your conference attendees have felt it too. How about offering designated office hours where your session speakers agree to make themselves available for 15 minute time-slots for follow-up questions?

## Purpose

*"The secret to success is constancy of purpose."* [What is the purpose of your event?](#) Return to the overarching *why* of your event – and how it aligns with your organizational goals. Why is it important to bring people together? What is the goal or outcome you wish to achieve – or service you aim to provide? Why are you bothering to put your conference together in the first place? Keep this as your **anchor** and the center from which you **pivot** for every decision when designing your conference. Challenge yourself, your staff, your board, your volunteers, and your key **stakeholders** this same question: *WHY* are we spending a significant amount of time, money and resources to create to produce this event? Define that purpose, communicate it, and then deliver on that promise.

## Quick

Did you know that TED Talks are being viewed at the rate of 1.5 million times a day?? That means that a new viewing commences 17 times/second! While the content is indeed compelling, another key component of TED's success is the concept of sound-bite learning. We are constantly bombarded with information. Our senses are saturated, and [attention spans are diminishing](#). (As an example – you made it to page 6 – letter Q – many have stopped already!) Thus, the idea of sitting for 60 to 90 minutes in an education session can drive people away. Introduce shorter learning opportunities such as Ignite, speed networking, Discussion Dens, or micro-coaching.

## Repeat

You can't be in two places at once – and neither can your attendees. If you have multiple offerings that make it hard for attendees to choose what to go to, help them out. (In the virtual space we can record and rebroadcast later.) Save space on the last day of your conference to repeat the most popular sessions. Attendees cast their votes so you can repeat the popular session, “Back by Popular Demand.”

## Sunrise & Sunset

The early bird gets the worm - unless you are a night owl. Your attendees have different rhythms when they do their best thinking. So cater to them with early riser sessions that are formal or informal like sunrise yoga, wisdom while you walk, or coffee and conversation on a curated topic. And for those who come alive at night, what about scheduled fireside chats, or evening reflection wanderings?

## Trending Now

Offer a track of “Just in Time” sessions through the entire conference which is saved for something that is trending in real-time in the week or two leading into the event. Too often we have to plan our events so many months in advance that we don't allow space for a hot off the press or trending topic to get slotted in. Are there policies recently enforced, global issues, or new mergers and acquisitions affecting your industry? Save space for these hot-off-the-press conversations.

## Unique Value Proposition

**"You are unique, just like everyone else."** Sure you have great content, networking, and the most innovative expo hall at your event – but are you offering what attendees can't get anywhere else!? For better or worse, we live in an age of competition. We compete for dollars, time – and perhaps more importantly – attention. What's your conference's [UVP](#) that keeps members coming back for more?

## Valleys & Peaks

Often association conferences and events are over-programmed. We purposefully pack so much in to provide that ever-coveted (and necessary) ROI. The conference experience has natural peaks and valleys. As planners, our job is to provide energy bursts to keep attendees engaged. And allow for white space and reflection. Along those lines, provide wholesome nourishing food in lieu of – or in addition to the more common sugary snacks and beverages. Virtually – add some music, entertainment, desk yoga, or a stretch break.

## Wisdom While You Walk

Gather attendees together around an overarching topic, and dissect that large topic into key themes. Once complete, assign small groups (no larger than five) to venture outside the room for a designated amount of time to discuss the issue. When they return, the small groups report out what was discussed. BONUS: folks can get fresh air and move about the property, venue, or location.

## apeX

Next year's conference will NOT be a Xeroxed copy of last year's conference. Instead, it will be the pinnacle, apeX experience your members crave all year. All the microdecisions you make about how the conference looks will make a world of difference in how it feels. So, *how* do you want your attendees/participants to feel? How do you want the whole conference experience to unfold? Be **purposeful** in designing the event. Prep and train your speakers. Ask members and attendees for feedback and incorporate their suggestions. Find your squeakiest wheel to design your next event right along with you - not in a contentious way but in a **collaborative** way. Look beyond your biggest advocates to help you in this process.

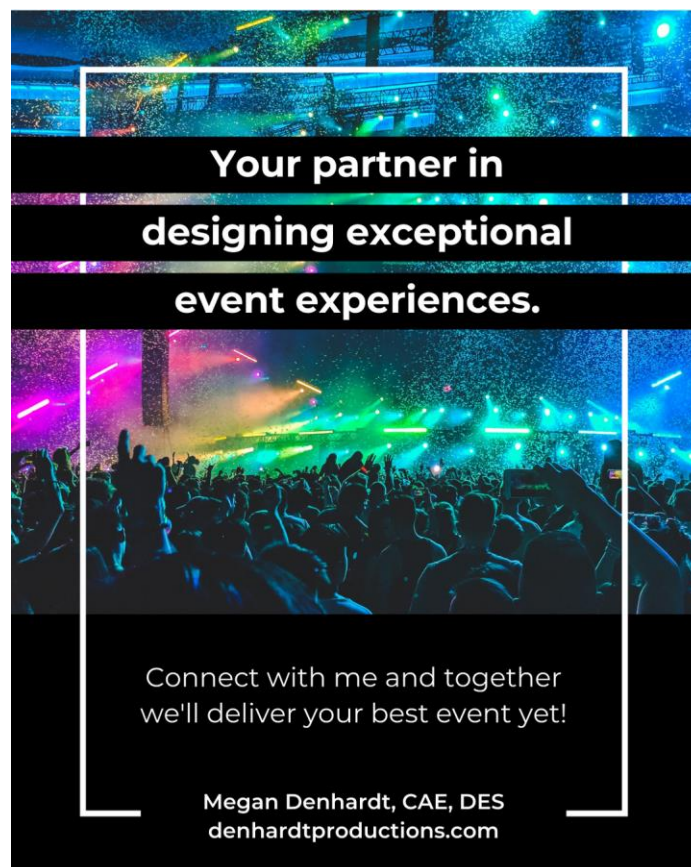
It is often the naysayers that can bring exceptional and unique insight. Surround your event and conference team with diverse minds, backgrounds and perspectives - so you can deliver the premiere, crème de-la crème, delightful, and worthwhile experience you set out to do. (See, that **X** was worked in a couple of times! Impressed that it wasn't just about using xylophones or x-rays!?!)

## Young Professionals

Just as the seasoned professional has knowledge and experience to share, so does the young professional. Who are the rising stars in your industry that you can engage with to become advocates for your conference and your organization? How can you leverage those eager, interested, and available YPs to speak, ask questions, and volunteer? These newcomers are truly the **future leaders of your organization** – so get them on board! Make them feel loved, and nurture that relationship by giving them a voice through membership benefits and involvement opportunities at your conference.

## Zen Den

In order to learn, absorb and reflect, white space or negative space can be helpful where attendees can remove themselves from the noise and busy schedule of a conference. Create space for attendees to disconnect in an "Un-engagement Lounge" or "Concentration Zone." (CalSAE also does a great job of this!) These can be self-driven with designated areas where attendees take what they have learned or discussed in their sessions and spend time writing or reflecting on how those areas can be applied to their organization, industry at large - or personal life. Provide comfy furniture, soft lighting, classical music, massage chairs, adult coloring books, etc. Sometimes it is in this quiet space that the ah-hah moment happens. Build for it so your attendees keep coming back for more.



*There you have it – that was your **A-Z Guide** to break the traditional conference mold.*

*These concepts offer some ideas to enhance your next event.*

*I'd love to hear what you think.*

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