

The Next Generation Attendee: Are You Ready for Them?

# Next-Gen Conference Attendees



Dave Lutz, Managing Director at [Velvet Chainsaw Consulting](#), spoke to a group of 185 MPI, PCMA and IAEE members and guests at the Hilton Easton in Columbus, Ohio on Monday, September 25th. The focus of his topic was attracting and retaining next generation conference attendees now and in the future.

Dave suggested that meeting and association planners need to consider how the workforce is changing.

In fact, according to the [Brookings Institute](#), based on data collected two years ago:

- 33% of all working-age people are Millennials



- As Millennials continue to graduate from college that number will increase
- By 2025 (8 short years away), Millennials will account for 75% of working-age people.

Which, according to Dave, is all the more reason planners need to constantly evaluate conference concepts and their effectiveness.

### Best Growth Strategy?

Dave identified three common ways meeting planners evaluate growth of their events and posed the following question to the crowd:

### Which is best for sustainable growth for associations during the next 10 years?

1. **Bell curve:** Where the farm team is being raised and there is a strong representation from mid-career practitioners. Dave believes that this is the most sustainable model. Early-career professionals tend to follow in the foot-steps of the mid-career professionals who mentor them.
2. **U-Shaped:** This is a common plot to STEM meetings where the two highest



attending groups are students and professors. Where the largest group of attendees are young (20-29 years old) or older (55+) and mid-career practitioners are a smaller segment. This is not a sustainable because student attendees rarely convert once they enter the profession.

3. **Equal attendance across the board:** At face value, this appears to be a healthy indicator, but is extremely rare to find. It's challenging trying to be "all things to all people". Your conference can become too wide, thus not meeting the needs of any of defined target market.

While there was a lot of discussion from the group which of the three works best for long-term attendee sustainability, Dave offered the following insights:

**Attendees vote with their feet and then their wallet.** The staff at Velvet Chainsaw Consulting spends a lot of time during conferences studying audience behaviors. Are they engaged? Are they leaving the sessions early? If they are not learning or liking the content, you have a problem.

**The best mindset for next generation is to try new things every year.** Take some risks and they may pay off. Without change, your conference will become stale and boring.

## Planners Also Need to Contend with Big Workforce Trends



1. According to LinkedIn, upon post-graduation from college, most **Millennials have 4 jobs within 10 years**, which means they stay on average only 2.5 years at a company. This can be a problem if you are trying to cultivate the bell curve methodology listed above.

2. There is a rise in gig oriented jobs.

According to [Forbes](#), **50% of the US workforce** will be gig oriented by 2020. Which means if a person wants to attend a conference, there is a high probability they will have to pay for the conference themselves. In this case, attendees will have to weigh the cost versus the benefits and the opportunity cost of not being in the office.

3. [Humalogy](#) is the study of how much human effort is aided by technology. If technology is not trusted, it won't be adopted in the workplace or at your event.

## Six Ways Hotels are Targeting Millennials

The [Washington Post](#) cited these six ways hotels are becoming more relevant to Millennial preferences:

1. Less beige, bolder decor
2. Providing guests with interactive hotel apps
3. Setting up co-working spaces
4. Delivering on selfie-worthy spaces, food and beverages
5. Practicing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
6. Shifting to hip dining experiences

“If we attract young people, old people will show up. But if you build a hotel for old people, young people never show up,” stated Scott Greenberg, president and chief executive of Smashotels.

We are very much targeting a millennial mind-set versus a generational audience,” Rose Anderson, vice president of global branding and innovation with Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group shared.

### Shifting behaviors

Josh Packard, Author of [Church Refugees: Sociologists reveal why people are DONE with church but not their faith](#) addresses why people are leaving churches. Dave used this

analogy: People leave church but still believe in God. Attendees leave associations, but still have passion for their profession. It is a societal trend and society distrusts institutions.

The question of the day is: **Are people lumping your association into that mistrust?**

There are certain things you need to do to regain or keep this trust. These four were identified in the book:

1. Participation, not dictation
2. Activity not bureaucracy
3. Conversation not control or doctrine
4. Community not judgement

**How can you get people to your event and trust you?**

Dave believes you must adopt the four principles listed above to be relevant.

## 16 Next Audience Trends

Velvet Chainsaw has identified these tactics as ways to attract and serve the next generation conference participants

1. **Novice Content:** Don't name it novice; be careful how you label sessions as people don't want to be known as a novice or beginner.
2. **Get them while they are young** (STEM groups, student memberships) and you will have them for life. This strategy may be best applied in other programs and services vs. the big annual conference.
3. **Newbie only events:** Again, labels matter. Early career professionals want to network with the veterans. First-timer ribbons may not be desired.
4. **Speed networking** – Good for hosted buyer type events, but not high value for attendees.
5. **Gamification** – Can be effective, but don't emulate online gaming at face to face events.
6. **Mentorship programs** can be highly effective.
7. **Put the kids in the show.** Mid-career practitioners rarely choose to attend education that doesn't challenge their existing knowledge.
8. **Bite-sized education:** These are only effective when attendees can connect the content to their previous knowledge and have time to discuss how to apply back in the workplace.
9. **Innovative room sets** – can definitely help encourage participation and discussion.
10. **Seat at the table** – this can be helpful to teaching old dogs, new tricks.
11. **Wellness activities** – these are increasing in popularity and participation for all ages.

- 12. Diversity** – Very important to not be seen as the old white male organization!
- 13. Social Media** – Amplification and share-worthiness is key. Social media on its own is not a silver bullet.
- 14. Crowdsourcing** – Co-creation is a trait that community members value.  
Crowdsourcing can be helpful for a portion, but not all, of a conference program.

#### Session Close

The purpose of this meeting was to get supplier and meeting planners to start talking and taking action to update and listen to their attendees. There was a lot of interaction between participants and with Dave. As he pointed out, learning is best when presented content is interspersed with small group discussion.