

DON'T PLAN EVENTS, PLAN EXPERIENCES

How to Design Events That Increase Engagement,
Connection, and Member Value



Angela Strecker | Blue Wings Events

What happened because they attended?

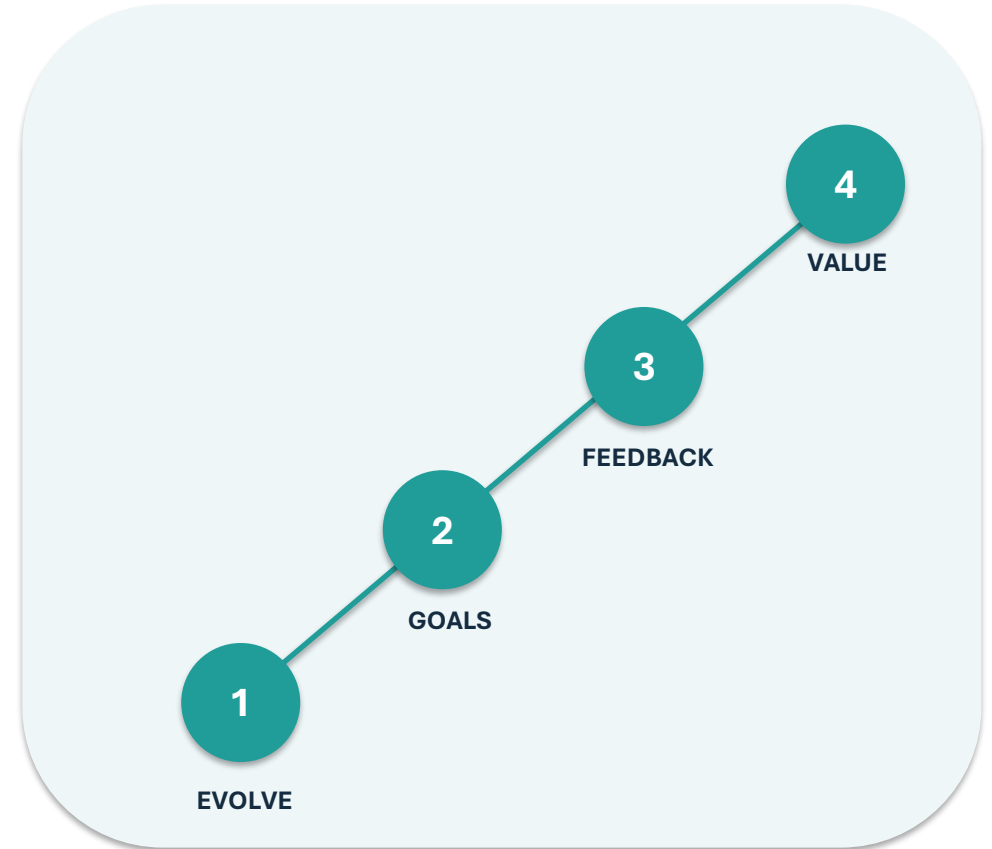
- Attendance and budget are important—but incomplete measures.
- Did members connect, learn, participate, or feel they belong?
- Did the event advance the association's priorities?

Move from delivering an agenda to creating an outcome.



Today's roadmap

- Recognize when an event needs to evolve
- Set goals and design intentional experiences
- Capture day-of and post-event feedback
- Demonstrate value and continuously improve



When is it time to rethink an event?

- Engagement is flat - even when attendance is steady
- The same attendees participate year after year
- Sponsors or exhibitors question their value
- Member expectations or organizational priorities have shifted

SIGNALS

- ↓ Attendance
- ↔ Engagement
- ? Sponsor value
- ↺ Same format

If we built this event today, would we design it the same way?

Revamp with purpose

- KEEP: traditions and elements that support your goals
- CHANGE: valuable elements that need a better format
- REMOVE: activities with little demonstrated value
- TEST: one new idea, then measure the response

New does not automatically mean better.

Start with WHY - not last year's agenda

- Choose one primary and one secondary event goal
- Connect them to member and association priorities
- Define success before choosing the format or activities

“Because we’ve always done it” is not an event objective.



Make the goal measurable

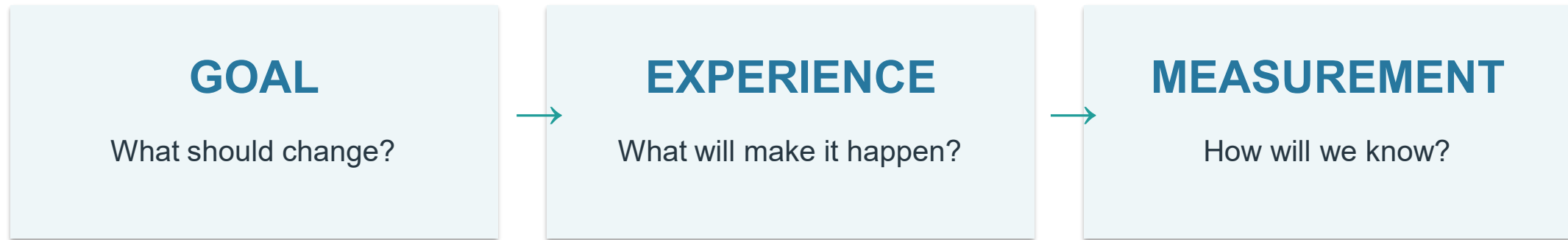
Illustrative targets - set your own baseline and realistic measures.

- Connection: 75% make three new professional connections
- Education: 80% identify one action they intend to take
- Engagement: 25% explore a program, committee, or resource



**MEASURABLE
OUTCOME**

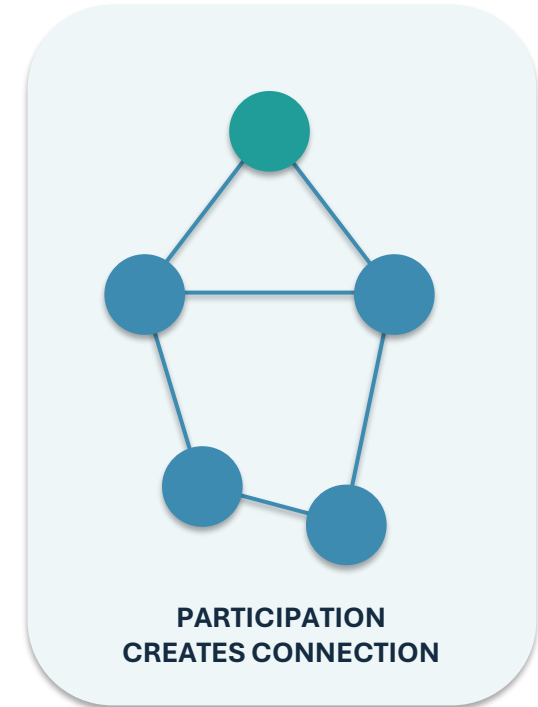
The framework



Design backward from the outcome you want.

Design for participation

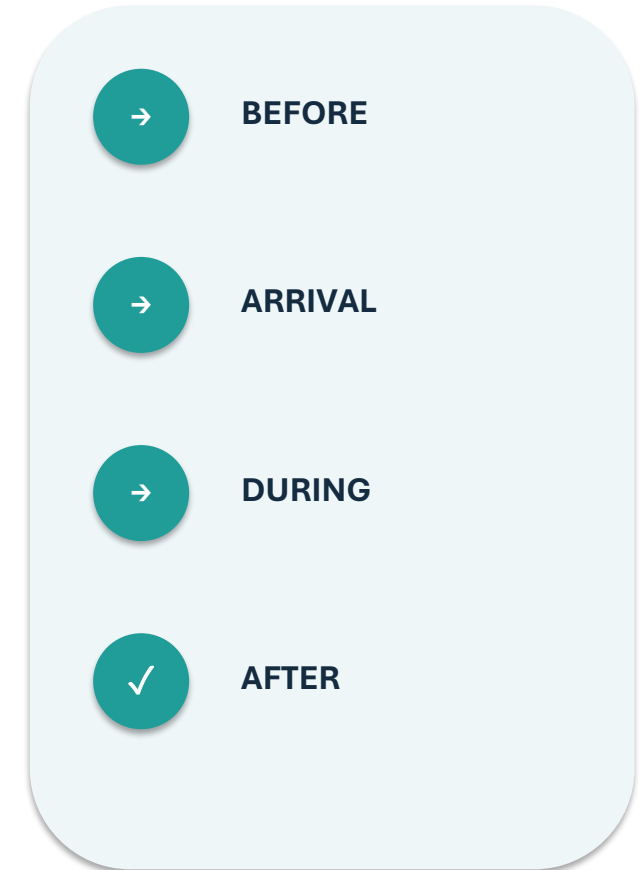
- Turn passive receptions into intentional introductions
- Mix members across organizations, regions, and career stages
- Give sponsors meaningful ways to interact
- Create discussion and application - not just more presentations



Engagement is not the same as entertainment.

Consider the full member journey

- BEFORE: communicate value and start connections
- ARRIVAL: help newcomers feel welcome
- DURING: create purposeful interaction and breathing room
- AFTER: continue the conversation and invite next steps



ENGAGEMENT ISN'T THE SAME AS ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment enhances the atmosphere. Participation creates the connection.

FUN

A photo booth

MEMORABLE

A great band

EXPERIENCE

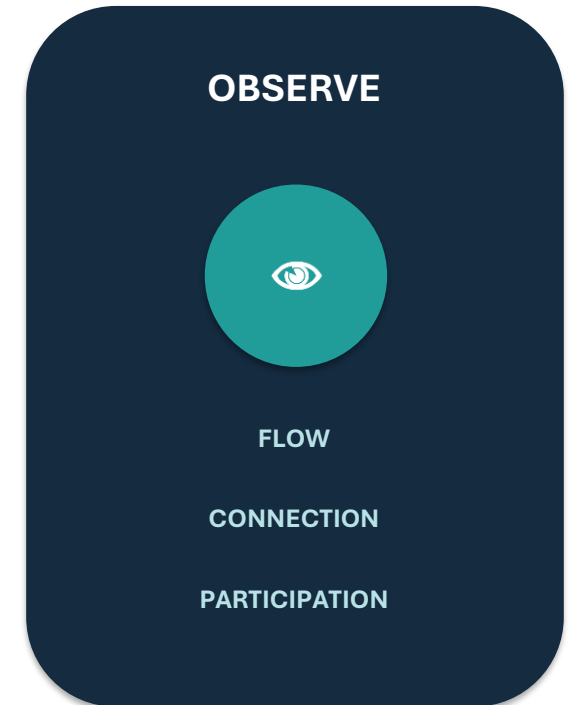
Amazing food

Entertainment has a place - but entertainment alone doesn't create engagement.

**ENGAGEMENT HAPPENS WHEN ATTENDEES BECOME
PARTICIPANTS INSTEAD OF SPECTATORS.**

Measure while the event is happening

- Observe participation, room flow, conversations, and departures
- Ask: “What has been most valuable today?”
- Ask: “Have you met someone new?”
- Record issues you can fix before the event ends



Watch what people do - not only what they later say.

Give someone ownership of experience

- Assign staff or volunteers to observe - not only manage logistics
- Capture: what worked, what didn't, what we heard
- Share quick observations throughout the day
- Use the notes to begin your event debrief



Survey for outcomes, not only satisfaction

- Connection: How many new professional contacts did you make?
- Education: What is one idea you plan to apply?
- Member value: Did this strengthen the value you see in membership?
- Engagement: Which program or opportunity interests you next?

POST-EVENT PULSE

☐

Outcome question

☐

Outcome question

☐

Outcome question

☐

Outcome question

Decide what to measure when you set the goal.

Keep feedback short - and useful

- Use a few focused questions rather than a long generic survey
- Compare survey responses with onsite observations and participation data
- Hear from members, newcomers, sponsors, exhibitors, and volunteers
- Separate immediate reactions from later behavior



COMPARE WHAT THEY SAID WITH WHAT YOU SAW

Survey results shouldn't exist in isolation.



WHAT THEY SAID

87% rated networking
excellent

WHAT YOU SAW

First-time attendees struggled to join conversations; many left after 20 minutes.

Another perspective: members liked the exhibit hall, while exhibitors reported too few meaningful conversations.

COMPARE SURVEYS + ONSITE OBSERVATIONS + BEHAVIORAL DATA

Listen to: members • first-time attendees • sponsors • exhibitors • speakers • staff • volunteers • board

ROI is more than event revenue

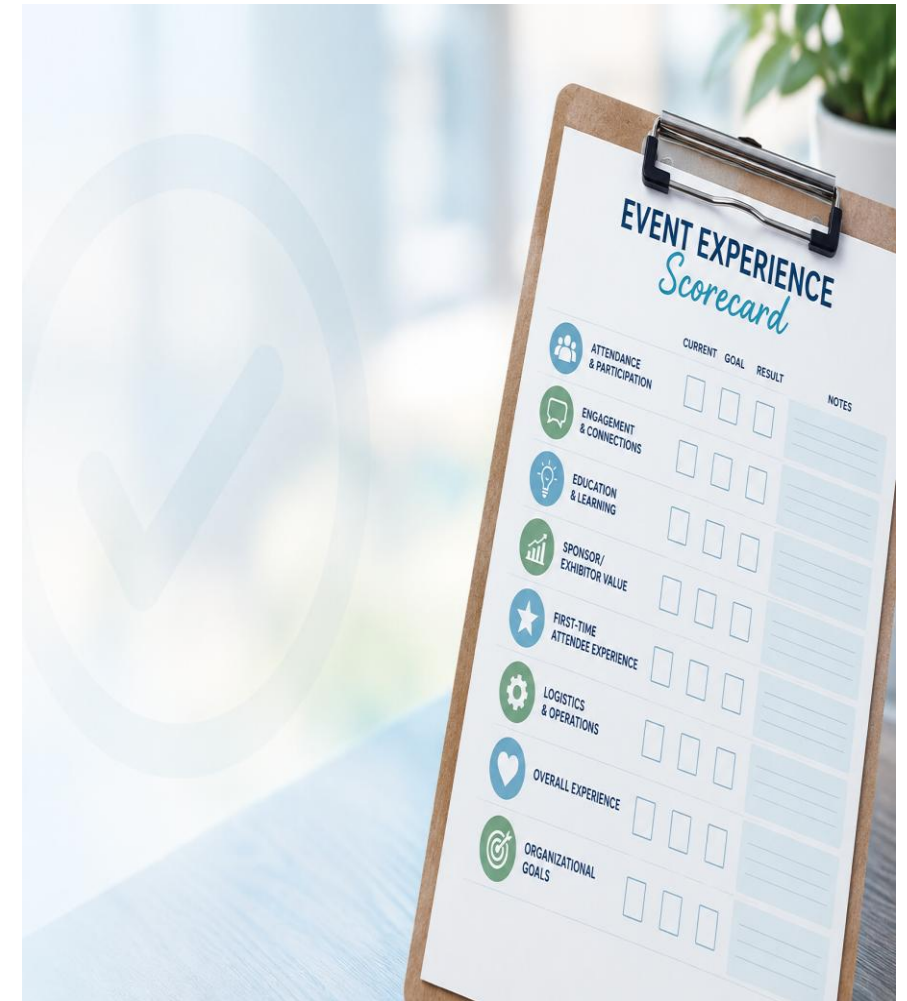
- Financial return: revenue, cost, margin, sponsor renewals
- Member return: connection, education, participation, retention
- Organizational return: membership growth, advocacy, volunteer interest
- Use both numbers and stories, with clear limitations



What did this investment accomplish?

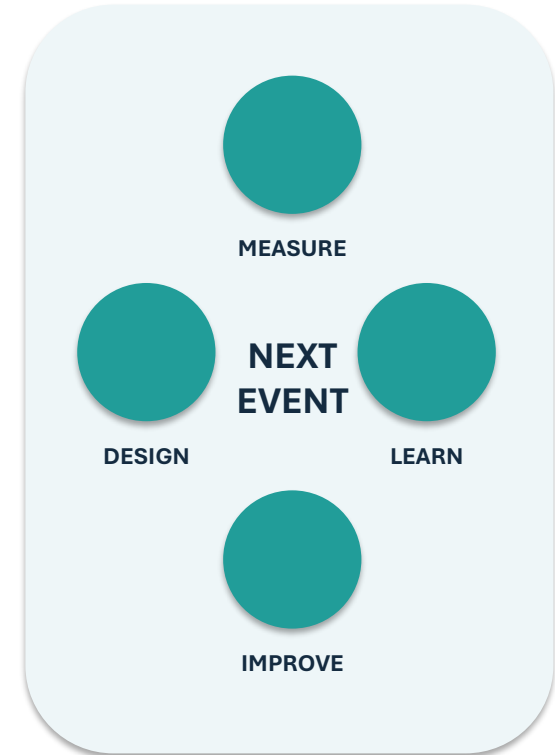
Your event experience scorecard

- What are our top one or two goals?
- What should members think, feel, or do differently?
- Which experiences support those outcomes?
- How will we measure results—during and after?
- How will we continue engagement after the event?



Turn feedback into next year's decisions

- Compare results with the goals established before planning
- Identify what to keep, change, remove, or test
- Assign owners and deadlines for follow-up
- Report results to the board, sponsors, and members



AUDIENCE EXERCISE | REDESIGN ONE ELEMENT

Example: Turn a traditional networking reception into intentional connections

GOAL

Help members make three new professional connections.

EXPERIENCE

Use 20 minutes of facilitated introductions instead of only open mingling.

MEASURE

Observe participation; ask how many new connections attendees made.

YOUR TURN • 4 MINUTES

1. EVENT: What event are you working on?
2. GOAL: What ONE thing should happen because people attended?
3. EXPERIENCE: What could you intentionally design to help make that happen?
4. MEASUREMENT: How will you know whether it worked?

Change it because you want to accomplish something - not just to make it different.



ONE THING I'LL DO DIFFERENTLY

Think about the next event you're responsible for.

Write down ONE specific action you will take.

Not: "Make it more engaging."

Try one of these:

- Create three facilitated introductions for every first-time attendee.
- Cut the awards program by 20 minutes.
- Replace one presentation with facilitated table discussion.
- Ask sponsors whether they made meaningful connections.
- Assign one staff member to observe the attendee experience.

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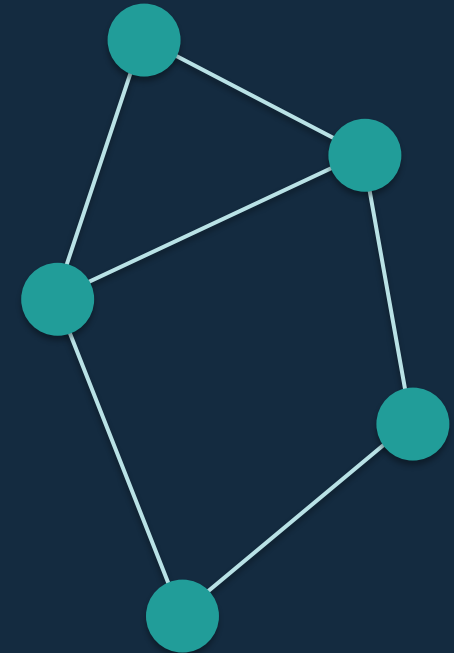


CLOSING | WHAT HAPPENED BECAUSE THEY CAME?

They may forget the centerpiece,
the lunch, or even the speakers.

**They'll remember the connection.
The idea. The opportunity.
The feeling that they belonged.**

We don't just produce events. We create member value.



WHAT HAPPENED BECAUSE THEY DID?

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