



## Evaluating a Conference

**I am chair of an evaluation committee for a large annual conference slated for two years from now. Many features of the conference are evaluated in the same way year in and year out. How can I make “my” evaluation different?**

Consider the following to make the evaluation more meaningful to *both* participants and the planning committee:

- Since the most worthwhile evaluations are targeted for decision making (Patton, 1986), first meet with the conference committee chairs.
- Have the chairs enumerate the decisions they need to make for which they have no previous data or oral history. Design an evaluation for the *conference previous to yours* to get participant feedback for the committee *before* you plan your conference in the following year. The evaluation could solicit opinions about conference focus, speakers, or format. Be specific.
- Ask conference committee chairs to enumerate any new features in the principal conference you are charged with evaluating; then design the evaluation so that participants give you feedback on *just* those features.
- Ask participants how they would modify the new feature in the future. New or proposed features in a conference lend themselves well to the use of qualitative evaluation methods such as *Listening Posts* or focus groups.
- Inform participants the ways in which this evaluation is different than previous ones. You'll get more cooperation.
- Consider sampling a large conference audience for the evaluation. Following receipt of the registration, inform a random (or stratified) sample of participants that they were selected to evaluate *this year* (and that others will be chosen next year to make the process more user-friendly over time). Follow up with a short survey to gather baseline data before the conference begins.
- Consider using e-mail, the web, or telephone for the evaluation.

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