

Debunking the Myths of the “Paperless Conference”

Meeting planners and organizers of educational events banter around the phrase “paperless conference” in this age of shrinking budgets and environmental awareness. But what truly defines a “paperless conference,” and is it really possible?

This white paper will explore the concept of the paperless conference and how it is unlikely that educational events will truly be able to abandon paper completely at their events. The white paper will further offer case studies and ideas about reducing paper consumption while still serving the needs of attendees.

Marketing the Paperless Conference

“The word *paperless* is a black-and-white term covering many shades of gray,” noted Lindy Dreyer, the author of the blog [Association Marketing Springboard](#). Associations are now marketing events as paperless for any number of reasons, such as:

- ▶ **No on-site handouts!** Your educational meeting materials on CD or flash drive.
- ▶ **Print on demand!** Printing stations on site for attendees.
- ▶ **Download now!** Making the handouts solely available online before the meeting for attendees to print and bring them to the event.
- ▶ **We’ve gone green!** No more handouts.

The common denominator in all paperless solutions is to minimize or eliminate on-site printed materials. But, despite best intentions, none of the above solutions can be called a paperless conference.

“What many associations inadvertently end up doing when they switch to paperless is to shift the responsibility of printing educational meeting materials from the association to the attendee,” said Omnipress Vice President Paul Wehking, a 20-year veteran in the association conference industry. “In addition, associations that try to go paperless still use printed



conference promotions and on-site programs, not to mention the printed materials that exhibitors provide.”

Lisa Junker, Deputy Editor for ASAE and The Center, recently addressed the dangers of marketing an event as paperless.

“One example I’ve seen several times recently is that of advertising a conference as ‘paperless’ after eliminating an on-site program or education session handouts, while not considering the amount of paper used elsewhere at the meeting,” Junker said on ASAE’s blog, [Acronym](#).

“Once attendees have the expectation that the conference is paperless, they will notice every time you use paper throughout the event, and question it.”

Reasons Associations Try Paperless

Wehking cites two main reasons that associations try to create a paperless conference. First, associations want to be environmentally sensitive, so they advertise they are doing away with on-site handouts and other provided materials. Second, association meeting coordinators expect to cut costs and hassle with the move.

“The truth is paperless means paperless – no advance marketing mailers, no on-site notebooks, no printed evaluation sheets,” Wehking said. “The fact is, paper is not the biggest environmental threat from the meetings industry. Addressing meeting facilities, lodging and travel can have the largest environmental impact.”

Dreyer said it is not surprising that the reasons for trying paperless are all focused on the business and logistics of the meeting. “But when marketing or presenting a reason to attendees, you must focus on a reason that lessening handouts adds value to their experience,” she said. “Is it more convenient? Are you only eliminating non-essential handouts? Are you still providing what every attendee needs for maximum learning?”

The Top Five Paperless Conference Myths

Wehking said associations rely on five major justifications when thinking about a paperless conference. But each idea has faulty logic and can create liabilities for associations that try to use the justifications as reasons to call their events paperless.

“Once attendees have the expectation that the conference is paperless, they will notice every time you use paper throughout the event, and question it.”





Myth #1

We can put everything online before the event and just tell people to bring the meeting material.

No matter how many times you tell attendees to bring badges and registration materials with them when they come to your event, you can count on 25 to 50 percent of them forgetting. And the number is significantly higher when you ask them to bring handouts for the sessions they want to attend.

“Attendees get to the registration counter or in an educational session and say, ‘Where’s my stuff?’” Wehking said. “We’ve seen it hundreds of times.”

Some associations make the mistake of thinking Internet access in the conference hall will give attendees access to the handouts online. But attendees may not bring a laptop. Even if they do, wireless access does not give attendees access to printers and may not be reliable. Moreover, some speakers feel laptops in session rooms are a distraction to them and other attendees (e.g., checking email and *tap-tap-tapping* to take notes).



Myth #2

We can give a flash drive or CD on site, and attendees can take the electronic versions home with them.

Conference goers attend an educational event to learn from the presenters. To get the most out of a session, attendees like to have the presenter’s materials in front of them. “It’s been that way since people started gathering to share information,” Wehking said. “Attendees are always going to want to follow along and take notes.”

Joan Eisenstodt, an expert in training as well as meetings program and delivery design, emphasized that attendees have different learning styles. Meeting planners need to consider delivering materials in formats all participants can absorb.

“In an MPI Foundation study some years ago – and in all the training I do on adult learning at meetings – it is said over and over that people WANT handouts,” Eisenstodt said. “People learn differently. To have the tools for their needs seems polite!”

Jeffrey LeBoeuf, CEO for the association management company Association Innovators, said the physicians in his associations make it clear that they want the handouts on site. “With the whole concept of going paperless, you’re losing a lot of the visual learners’ ability to follow and take notes, plus the ability to give all attendees additional information. Certainly some people will take the energy to go online and download additional info. I daresay I don’t think it is 100 percent of the attendees.”

“With the whole concept of going paperless, you’re losing visual learners’ ability to follow and take notes.”



Myth #3

We can provide printing kiosks so we don't have to print a big binder full of materials, and attendees can still get the handouts they want before their sessions.

After two years of experiments with paperless conferences at different events, ASAE and The Center published an article on lessons learned. Author Megan Denhardt, senior manager of learning and community for ASAE, said their printing stations were a challenge.

"If you go this route, be sure you have staff or volunteers take shifts to monitor the printing stations the entire time," the article advised. "We had staff rotating throughout, and that wasn't enough to manage the crowds, fill the printers with paper and fix any paper jams."

Denhardt said attendees frequently hit the "print" button more than once if the printer didn't immediately respond, "so it wasted a lot of paper at this 'paperless meeting.'"

The American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons said they stopped offering printing stations because of the cost and the hassle. "Printing kiosks went through paper, and HUGE lines for those who just won't go electronic," said Barbara Choyke, AAOMS Associate Executive Director for continuing education, meetings and exhibitions. "The kiosk defeats your purpose of going green."



Myth #4

Our attendees don't really care one way or the other about paper handouts.

Since one of the questions most often asked at a session is, "Can I have a copy of the presentation?", it's safe to say that attendees DO care about handouts, Wehking said.

LeBoeuf agreed. "As a convention participant, I like handouts!. If I'm spending several hundred dollars for tuition, I want handouts. I don't want to have to work for them either (i.e., print them myself)."

At a recent event, Omnipress' Marketing Leader Chris Uschan said half the attendees indicated in a pre-conference survey that they didn't want on-site handouts. "But when we were sitting in a session that had run out of handouts, the meeting staff asked, 'Who would like a copy?' All of the attendees without a handout raised their hands!" Uschan said.

In addition, attendees don't just want handouts, Wehking said, they want handouts from *every* session.

ASAE's Denhardt cited the importance of collecting handouts from presenters as a major lesson learned at

"Attendees expect handouts and it affects overall satisfaction ratings when content leaders don't provide them."

ASAE's paperless events. "Some attendees were frustrated that every single session didn't have a handout," Denhardt said. "This year, we have put more emphasis on our content leaders in telling them that attendees expect handouts and it affects overall satisfaction ratings when content leaders don't provide them."



Myth #5

Our attendees will see us as "green" if we go paperless.

As ASAE's Junker noted, associations that market a paperless conference set the bar high for environmental consciousness. "The more you push the environmental angle, the higher expectations are – which is a good thing, but can be a challenge for the organization to meet those expectations."

LeBoeuf noted that associations have to prove to attendees that the real motivation behind the paperless push is environmental, not fiscal. "To the participant 'going green' seems like a convenient excuse to 'go cheap,'" he said.

Dreyer said associations can reduce their environmental footprints in many ways without having to resort to marketing a paperless conference. "Paper handouts have a relatively minimal impact on the environment when compared with other meeting activities: travel, hotel use, convention center carbon footprint, food service, air conditioning in meeting rooms, and so much more."

"Paper handouts have a relatively minimal impact on the environment when compared with other meeting activities."

Real Association Solutions: Alternatives to the Paperless Conference

The following case studies demonstrate how associations have developed their own solutions to balance attendees' needs for on-site materials and cost-cutting and environmental initiatives.

Offering Attendees a Choice

American College of Radiology – Radiation Therapy Oncology Group

- ▶ In 2006, the organization wanted to go paperless with their "Meeting Book" from their annual event. They opted to give registrants the option to receive the meeting book in CD or printed format, and they have seen a consistent demand for the printed version.

Veterinary Emergency Critical Care Society

- ▶ VECCS carefully analyzes input from their attendees each year to determine what format the registrants want for their educational meeting material. "We have an almost even split between those who want the book and those who prefer the CD," said VECCS Executive Director Dr. Gary Stamp. "Although our goal is to move towards digital delivery (CD and online) of education material, we will continue to provide them what they want."

Using Full Proceedings as Non-Dues Revenue Source

Association of State Dam Safety Officials

- ▶ ASDSO looked toward electronic delivery options when their proceedings grew too large to be practical. They decided to provide a printed program booklet with presentation abstracts, placing the full technical papers on CD. They then offered the complete CD for sale post event in an on-demand format. “We didn’t want to continue printing the technical proceedings in book form—which had grown to over 900 pages—but we didn’t want to eliminate the tangible materials on site for our attendees,” said Susan Sorrell, ASDSO meetings and membership director. “Our blended solution allowed us to keep both options and actually generate a little non-dues revenue as well.”

Providing Condensed Handouts on Site with CD and Online Resources

Child Life Council

- ▶ After surveying their members, the Child Life Council received a positive response to turning their 500-page proceedings to a journal notepad with a CD. They also posted the material online.

American College of Osteopathic Surgeons

- ▶ Two years ago, ACOS successfully transformed their 700-page book to a condensed 180 page final program/abstract book with a CD adhered to the inside cover.

International Lactation Consultant Association

- ▶ For the second year, ILCA produced a 50-page compendium book and CD in place of their 300-page plastic coil book saving paper and money while keeping attendees happy.

Customizing Solutions per Event

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

- ▶ AAAAI evaluates the needs of attendees at its different events. For the annual meeting, the group collects 700+ files and offers the handouts online or on CD. For their Fellows Program Meeting, they create a two-volume book for the doctors who attend.

Offering Printed Materials, On Demand

International Association for Aquatic Animal Medicine

- ▶ IAAAM leadership wanted to switch to paperless by offering all materials online only, but the group eventually decided to print a reduced number of materials for on-site distribution and offer the opportunity to order additional books from an on-demand print solution.

Ensuring Presenters Are Comfortable Submitting Material

American Industrial Hygiene Association

- ▶ AIHA leadership wanted to move the meeting materials online only, but 60 percent of their presenters were not comfortable allowing electronic access to their material. AIHA posted what they could online and printed course books for the rest. They also printed some copies of the material available online in anticipation of demand they would encounter on site

Conclusion

To avoid falling into one of the inherent traps of calling an event “paperless,” Wehking advised that associations stay away from the term and instead focus on reducing and recycling paper from their events.

“You don’t have to eliminate printed material – you just need to be paper smart! Ask your attendees what they want, and create a custom blend of electronic and printed resources,” Wehking said.



Conference Learning Journal and CD (with Session Handbook)

Omnipress’ Top Five “Paper Smart” Ideas

Omnipress provides custom solutions for the delivery of educational meeting materials for more than 800 associations each year. Wehking said these five strategies are some of the best to help Omnipress clients print smart and fulfill their goals of thinking green and cutting costs.

1. Reduce page counts with simple layout techniques, such as reducing font sizes and margins, printing slides 3-up and even limiting speakers to a set number of slides or pages.
2. Create Conference Learning Journals that give attendees session summaries and room for notes. Sponsors love having their logos on a giveaway that attendees will keep. Supplement the journals by offering all conference materials on CD or online.
3. Offer full handout collections and proceedings as print-on-demand options at pre-registration, on site and after the event. This is a great way to generate non-dues revenue while printing only what is needed.
4. Use recycled materials, such as recycled paper with a minimum of 30 percent post-consumer content, plus soy-based inks, low VOC toners and recycled binding materials.
5. Provide stapled session handouts in each room instead of a bound format. Print 20% more handouts than room capacity to allow for those attendees who session jump. Even though you are still printing handouts, you’ll see a substantial reduction in overall pages.

Go to Omnipress.com for More Resources

- ▶ Solutions for Green Meeting Materials
- ▶ Green Printing Tips
- ▶ The Green Glossary
- ▶ White Paper: An Association's Guide to Choosing the Right Media for Educational Conference Materials

About Omnipress

It's your job to figure out the educational meeting materials you need.
It's our job to make your job easier and your organization look good.

More than 800 organizations choose Omnipress to produce their conference and educational materials in print, on CD and on the web. Our team will customize the right balance of digital and printed material to make your event both green and cost effective.



COLLECT

Speaker file collection
On-site recording



PREPARE

Page numbering
Design, layout and
formatting



PRODUCE

Printed materials
Flash drives, CDs and
online



DISTRIBUTE

Event-site deliveries
On-demand solutions