Beyond a Sales Pitch

Students Can Learn Much by Networking with NACA Associate Members

By Jennifer Eral

Imagine you are in charge of bringing quality entertainment to your campus. The person in your position last year left a pile of promotional paraphernalia from artists and agents (also known in NACA as associate members) from all over the country. You have an open date in September you need to fill and you are left wondering where to start. Sound familiar?
It's true that tapes and advertisements can help you find the event you want, but that means spending your office hours, and probably some of your study time, reviewing videos, pamphlets and fold-out posters collected from mailings and NACA National Conventions and regional conferences. If that is how you prefer to work, fine. However, there is a way to work that will yield more benefits than merely getting an attraction to fill a date—get to know NACA's associate members.

There are tremendous advantages for students in getting to know associates. Positive relationships between students and associates help create useful networks, improve overall communication and reduce contract surprises. Such relationships also lead to more successful events on campus, create enduring ties that last long after the campus events are over, help students take better advantage of opportunities at NACA National Conventions and/or regional conferences, and may even prove beneficial when it comes time for students to find that all important first job out of college.

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Creating a Networking Web—Use Your Resources

The student affairs field and the entertainment business merge within NACA to form an incredibly tight networking web that serves as a rich source of information. A networking web basically means you know someone who knows someone who knows someone else. Start creating your own networking web with the people you know—your advisors, your peers, the office secretary and others. You will be surprised how quickly these people will suggest someone they have worked with in the past when you need that kind of input.

Some people know only a few associates, which is also okay. For example, you heard about a particular hypnotist and you want to bring him to your campus but your advisor doesn't know his agent. However, he does know the agent for "Joey the Dancing Kangaroo." No worries—Joey's agent may well know the hypnotist or the hypnotist's agent. Hopefully, the agent for Joey will put you in touch with the appropriate people to book the hypnotist. He might even ask you to pass on a personal message. From there the web increases—Joey's agent knows the hypnotist, the hypnotist knows other associates, and so on.

If not, his agent will know someone who knows the hypnotist. Hopefully the agent for Joey will be willing to put you in touch with the hypnotist or other associates, and will probably ask you to pass on a personal message!

Improving Communication

Good job! You have used your networking skills to bring the hypnotist you wanted to campus. Unfortunately, the agent for Joey the Dancing Kangaroo

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Beyond a Sales Pitch ...

now calls you once a week, begging you to bring Joey to campus. The agent was very helpful so now you should help him out by booking his act, right? Not necessarily.

Some artists and agents can seem intimidating to students. If they sound like businessmen and women who are only out for the money, you need to keep in mind that their livelihoods are at stake. It is their job to book acts and they have to make a living.

One way to deal with an agent like Joey’s—who may be making repetitive contacts or coming on too strong—is to explain exactly why you are not interested: "I cannot afford what you are offering," "I feel the students on my campus would not want to see this particular act," "I need an act on this particular date and you are not available," and so on. Don’t be afraid to be honest. Most importantly, don’t just say "no" quickly and hang up. That does not help the situation and it certainly doesn’t assist you in expanding your networking web.

Once Joey’s agent understands why you are not interested, explain that you have his information and will pass it down to the next person in your position, or even better, you will recommend Joey to another college. I highlight recommend because it is more than “passing on” or “mentioning” what he has to offer; you are offering to help him find business. Ask your advisor, peer, or office secretary if they know of any school that might want such an act. You can then send that school an e-mail or make a quick phone call. Although it is not your job to find business for Joey’s agent, if you put in five minutes of your time to help him out, you are very likely to receive assistance from him again in the future when you need it.

So now you have sent an e-mail about Joey to the programming board at a nearby school and you have reached the agent for the hypnotist. Luckily, you were able to book him for your open date in September. Now you have the network of programming that many regard as not-so-much-fun—the contract.

Dealing with Contracts

A contract essentially says in writing that the artist will provide certain specific services at a certain price. However, there are times when you find a lot more in the contract than you initially expected. Most professionals, and seasoned students, can share amusing stories about outrageous expectations, such as "needling" exactly 31 green M&Ms as part of the hospitality requirements.

Use your resources again. Ask the hypnotist for a list of other schools in the area with whom he has worked before or ask your advisor if they know of other schools that have worked with him. Call those schools and ask about their experiences. Campus Activities Programming also publishes Artist Performance Reports, which are submitted by your fellow school members who fill them out after campus events. Each report includes the artist’s name and/or agent, date, location, attendance numbers, and personal and audience reaction to the event. Finding out such information about the hypnotist beforehand will give you a better idea of what to expect and how to prepare for his performance, including having enough time to count out exactly 31 green M&Ms.

However, the best way to avoid surprises and to prevent frustration is to be up-front from the beginning. Before you even agree to start the process, ask the hypnotist what the contract may look like. Better yet, ask for a copy of an unsigned contract to be faxed to you. This will give you an idea of what demands you might face and will tell you if your venue and timeline are suitable for the artist. Also, associates should be able to tell you of unexpected incidents that occurred in the past involving their artists and other schools. Honesty between you and the associate not only enhances communication, it will help create a better performance for your campus.

Creating Enduring Ties

Another perfect time to work on creating a good, working relationship is when the associate is actually on campus. Offer to help the hypnotist and/or his crew unload and set up. Something simple such as carrying a small box or lighting equipment can make a big difference. The more welcome he feels and the less he has to worry about, the better the performance will be. Don’t you work better when everything is prepared and others are helpful and friendly?

When the event is over, do not just hand the artist his check and say goodbye. Tell him what you liked most and what you didn’t like. Even go over the Artist Performance Report with him if he has the time. Make sure to stay in contact with the hypnotist in the days and weeks after the performance. It can provide closure to the event, enhance the relationship and help avoid unwanted or unnecessary phone calls in the future.

Congratulations, you had a great event and now you are ready to start programming the rest of the year! You have a networking web, which now includes the agent for Joey and the hypnotist you brought to campus, you know what to say to persistent agents, you know how to minimize contract surprises, and you know what to do when an associate comes to campus, as well as when they leave. Nonetheless, your contact with associates should not end there. NACA conferences are a great way to enhance relationships with them, who can be very helpful during your time as a student leader and beyond.

If you are lucky enough to go to an NACA regional conference or National Convention, take advantage of it. It is your chance to learn more about being a campus leader, meet your peers from other schools, and of course, book entertainment. Talk to the people you meet, including other students, professionals who are facilitating educational sessions or who are friends with your advisor, and most importantly, associate members. It’s great to be able to put a face to the voices you’ve been hearing on the phone.

As I mentioned earlier, the student affairs field and the entertainment business join together within NACA to provide some incredible networks. It would be hard to find a student affairs professional (advisors and NACA volunteers) or an associate who does not know at least a handful of other professionals and associates at a conference. If you thought it was easy to create a networking web over the phone, imagine the possibilities at a conference or Convention.

Once you leave the conference or Convention, make sure to keep in touch with all those you met. Certainly keep all the business cards you collect and use wisely the networking web you have created. If you play your cards right, the associates (as well as professionals and other students) can be very helpful to you later in ways you might not have expected.
Getting Additional Assistance

Do not be afraid to ask artists and agents for advice about things other than booking entertainment. Associates are very busy people, but if you are able to develop positive relationships, they will often be willing to help you with your job search as time comes. They are very well versed in how to sell a product, which in this case would be you, and can be very helpful in developing résumé writing and interview skills.

Associates can also be helpful with other aspects of career development. Maybe the associate had the same major as you in college or you need help finding an internship. Maybe an associate's family member or friend will be able to offer a recommendation for you or even hire you once you graduate.

Associates know a lot of people at a number of schools. If you are interested in attending a particular graduate school, they probably know someone in the student activities office who may know someone in the program that interests you.

Many associate members also have connections within the greater business arena. They might not have started in the college market, or they might simultaneously work in other markets. They may be able to refer you to career possibilities you otherwise might not have considered. Take advantage of all available career opportunities and your time as a student leader will be well spent.

Talking and Listening Lead to Learning

The suggestions included above are but stepping stones to create good working relationships with associate members. Getting to know the associates you work with will make the process of being a program much easier. All these suggestions encompass one simple concept, though—talking. Talk to all the people who know what programming is all about, not just your advisor. Talk directly to associate members. It is okay to ask them questions about the process of programming and what you should do next. Most associates will gladly help you find the answers you’re seeking.

But while you’re talking, don’t forget to listen. By listening carefully and patiently, you will learn more than you thought you ever would as a student leader. The hypnotist you brought to campus is more than an entertainer; he is most likely an experienced leader as well.

Whether you have been a student programmer for four years or four days, your job is to talk, listen and learn. You are a leader and a follower; take advantage of your networking web, follow through with your events, and enjoy your time in college. Those videotapes and advertisements may seem overwhelming but they might lead to a world of information easily within your reach.

About the Author

Jennifer Eral is assistant director of Operations-University Center at the College of William & Mary (VA). She recently earned a master's degree in college student personnel from Western Illinois University. She previously earned a bachelor's degree in marine biology from Roger Williams University (RI). During her time in graduate school, she served as a summer intern for the Office of Student Activities at Salve Regina University (RI). While a student, she participated in the former New England Regional Conference and served as the former New England Region's student representative to the Regional Leadership Team. She also participated in several NACA National Conventions. This article is based on a session she co-presented with Ken Abrahams of Fun Enterprises, Inc. (MA) on the national and regional levels.