

# Ensure Your Convention Experience Generates “Take-Away”

Every franchisor should be well-equipped to generate meaningful take-away at your next franchise system convention.

BY LINDA GOLDMAN



**G**iven the substantial investment of time, effort and dollars required to mount a successful franchise system convention, it is essential (especially in our current economic climate) to ensure these events deliver significant and enduring “take-aways” for their franchisees, long after they’ve returned home, empowering them to grow their businesses. Easier said than done?

## Where to Begin?

One place for convention stakeholders to start is to ask themselves, “What do we want our franchisees to “take away” from the convention?” In almost all cases, the answer will include such tangibles as business-building tools and new competencies. However, in addition to whatever knowledge needs to be imparted to attendees, what else do you want them to take away? Some answers are obvious: “We want our franchisees to feel the ROI of our convention, convinced that it was worth leaving their families and businesses to attend.” And, “We want to recognize and reward our top achievers and to inspire and motivate others with their accomplishments.” Now delve deeper—the more specific you can be in identifying desired take-aways, the better. Intangibles such as your franchisees’ feelings of pride, determination, and increased confidence in themselves and the company’s leadership may in fact be the core objective of the convention, whether or not it has ever been overtly stated.

Perhaps the desired take-away is a clearer or reaffirmed understanding of your company’s mission. In the current marketplace, some franchisees are finding that the day-to-day challenges of keeping their businesses afloat is overshadowing their ability to focus on the franchise’s mission statement regardless of how inspirational it may have been early on. The convention is an ideal venue for the company’s founder(s) to directly address the audience with a heartfelt restatement of their passion for the business and its mission. To reinforce its relevancy today, the mission can be reiterated in the context of the current business environment. If delivered sincerely and dynamically, these words can continue to inspire and empower a franchisee when they’re back home “in the trenches.”

Have you experienced a change in senior leadership that may require a rebuilding of trust and loyalty from franchisees? There is no better time for new leaders to bond with their franchisees than the face-to-face opportunity afforded at a convention. The resultant take-away of a re-energized and confident field is invaluable.

Maybe your objective is to create a take-away that effects a change in attitude or cultivates new behaviors in your franchisees. While this desired new mind-set may involve such “tangibles” as educating your franchisees on new product lines, the ROI of updating their store design, or compliance with revised HR and management policies, it is the “intangible” attitude adjustment that will be key to franchisees changing their behavior. If you can reach them on an emotional and psychological level where attendees internalize the new direction, you will have created a more meaningful and enduring learning experience.

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## Identifying Attendee Preconceptions


After the desired take-aways have been identified, attendee preconceptions need to be addressed. Clearly understanding what an audience believes and what anxieties or apprehensions they may bring with them to the convention will help you find the best approach to influence and motivate them. Identifying preconceptions can be accomplished through surveys, focus groups or informal polling through traditional or social media outlets. Ideally, you can create a safe environment where all comments are welcome and challenging or negative feedback is accepted without repercussion. The goal here is to be able to most effectively reach your audience's hearts and minds by developing convention content based on the reality of your situation in the months prior. If there is an 800-pound gorilla in the room—a critical issue facing your franchise—it's best to confront it upfront, early in the agenda. An audience will be more open to listening, accepting and retaining

content if they believe their concerns have been heard and addressed.

Now you're ready to start strategizing. With a clear understanding of the desired take-aways and attendee preconceptions, you can begin to develop your convention agenda and general session elements. This probably means tossing a lot of balls in the air—from the sequence of presentations to the use of creative modules, to style and tone. What should be said when and by whom and in what manner? What might benefit from dramatizations or musical numbers and what works best at the lectern? What would be enhanced by introducing humor and what would be catastrophic if humor were used? What needs to be “built” throughout, what needs repeating, what needs to be presented in different forms? What should be stated right up front, and what should be reserved for later in the agenda? With the right strategies, you really can “transform” your audiences with new knowledge and new, changed or re-affirmed attitudes.

## Techniques for Maximizing Take-Away

There are several strategic communication techniques that can effectively create greater “take-away” of your key messages, two of which are suggested here. First, develop a more experiential convention with greater participation and “buy-in” by your franchisees. Studies show that experiential learning can be highly effective, engaging learners at a more personal level and helping them to learn new skills, new attitudes or even entirely new ways of thinking. Consider incorporating simple, fun games and role playing onstage or in breakout sessions to teach skills like team management, communication, and leadership. The factors of fun and immersion help the learner to retain the lessons for a longer period—an invaluable take-away. As a wise man (Ben Franklin, Confucius or an insightful Native American, depending on your source) once said, “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand.”



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Second, tell a story. From the beginning of time, storytelling has been a most compelling communication tool. A good story will be easily remembered and, in many cases, will touch an emotional chord and resonate for some time. Even with our omnipresent technological advances, storytelling remains firmly planted as a core method of engaging the mind and heart. Consider what moves you to action more, statistics of how many children go hungry each day or the personal story of one child who leaves home each morning unfed?

Whether a state-of-the-company speech or the introduction of a new marketing program, you can find ways of appropriately and effectively including storytelling as a means to engage, educate and influence. Encourage franchisees to share their stories. These stories can be effectively told in videos, from a lectern, as testimonials from a panel, and even in song or dance. While a general session is not strictly “theatre,” borrowing effective techniques from the theatre will ensure your audience’s interest is held and the story will continue to resonate with them for weeks, months or years.

## High-touch vs. High-tech

Investing early in strategically designing the convention’s objectives will help ensure that franchisees’ “take away” will endure long after they’ve returned home. A focus on “high touch” rather than high tech can help elicit those desired intangibles. A creative production partner can work with you to develop sessions and interactive presentation formats designed to touch the heart and mind and evoke the targeted emotional responses.

While “high touch” is important, high-tech can also play a significant role in extending your convention’s “take away” longer and to a wider audience. Consider using social media tools to keep alive the invaluable connections and positive feelings that were created at your convention. Some cost-effective options include featuring event videos on your company’s own YouTube network and creating a Facebook Group to which you encourage attendees to upload their convention photos. Using Web 2.0 utilities like Facebook, Twitter and blogs, continue to encourage feedback and suggestions for future conventions. Share what worked

well and what didn’t—social media users expect the real story, not the sugar-coated version. Keep people talking—support your online community by providing frequent updates and encouraging peer-to-peer communication.

To help ensure these Web 2.0 tools are embraced by your franchisees, schedule social media workshops during the convention and tailor them to your audience—teach beginners the basics and help alleviate their social-media-use anxieties, and provide advanced users demonstrations of new tools for systemizing digital communications.

With sufficient planning, a candid assessment of your company’s communication objectives and creative presentation support, every franchisor should be well-equipped to generate meaningful take-away at your next franchise system convention. ■

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*Linda Goldman, CMP, is vice president of Harris Goldman Productions, Inc. She can be reached at 619-299-7951 or lgoldman@harrisgoldman.com.*



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