

Bringing New Life to the Annual Conference

How one financial organization caught everyone's attention with a redesigned conference space.

"Our client is a financial services organization centered around the theme of delivering value," says Jesse Davis, president and CEO of Associations By Design, a Denver-based association management company. "The attendees want to get better at what they do, and they demand value. We have to deliver on that value or the conference won't survive."

To help achieve this goal, Davis' client hosts an annual event, which brings more than 200 members together for three days of industry-leading speakers, workshops and networking.

But it was becoming evident that the yearly event was feeling a bit stale. The meetings were starting to melt together and the sessions didn't feel unique or stand out on their own. This blur contributed to a perceived drain on participants' energy and engagement.

So, Davis set out to find ways to refresh the experience, starting with what she knew was most important to attendees – the breakout sessions and informal coffee breaks. Participants stressed how valuable these moments were, when they could share ideas and advice with their peers, and create new relationships.

One problem. The ballroom chairs provided by the venue are rigid and uncomfortable, making a simple turn to your neighbor an arduous task. "We were sticking them in a stiff chair and asking them to be productive in a straight jacket," says Davis.

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It was when she saw Steelcase Event Experiences' solutions at another conference that a connection was made to the problem. She noticed how the easily configurable tables and chairs elevated participant discussions and wondered if the same concept could help the networking spaces at her client's event.

To enhance networking and informal breaks, Davis worked with the [Steelcase Event Experiences](#) team to create an inviting, comfortable, home-like setting with places to put computers down, charge devices and support different postures.

"People come to the conference for the connections they make during the 20-minute coffee breaks," says Davis. "Inflexible ballroom chairs aren't comfortable for those conversations. But, this experience was like being in your living room."

As for the breakout sessions, Steelcase Event Experiences brought in chairs that were easy to move, so attendees could speak to their neighbors effortlessly.

“People are more engaged when they’re comfortable,” says Davis. “Sitting in hotel banquet chairs for four days isn’t comfortable.”

The updated spaces sent a message to attendees that they were worth investing in.

“It speaks to the cutting edge of the organization and also shows that they care about their members; they want to make this a worthwhile event,” says Davis.

The response was clear.

“People sat up and paid attention in the meetings. They felt, ‘wow, this is really different, this is going to be really interesting’,” says Davis. “They could tell we’d invested in their experience. The new space helped define the conference as forward thinking while generating buzz which led to new sponsorship opportunities that will benefit participants and encourage more investment in their next space.”

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